

ESMERALDA

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ELISABETH FAIRHOLME
AND PAMELA POWELL

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AHOY!

Illustrations by

ELISABETH FAIRHOLME

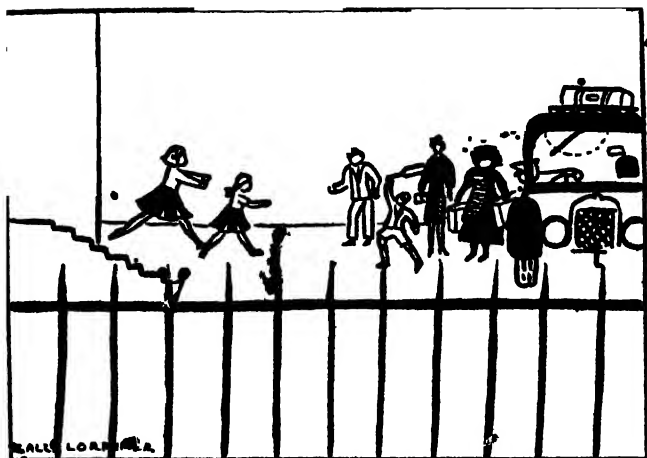


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CHAPTER I

'Here they are!'

Sally had been lying on the drawing-room floor covering a half-sheet of paper with sketches of imaginary sailing-boats, but as Jane's excited shriek echoed through the room, she came to her feet with a bound. Jane from the window, Sally from the hearth-rug, they raced down the stairs to the door.

Scarcely had Sally's leap down the last five steps landed her in the hall than the front door opened and a small figure bounded in. A school-cap was set at a rakish angle on unruly jet-black curls, piercing eyes blazed with excitement, and an extremely grubby hand waved a cricket-bat aloft.

'MICKIE!'

'Hullo, Sally, Hullo, Jane.'

'Where's Robert? Where's Robert? Hullo, Mum-miy. Oh, ROBERT!'

A tall boy, who looked as though he had suddenly grown out of all his clothes, as indeed he had, was helping his mother carefully out of the taxi. This done, he, too, turned to greet his excited sister, and for a few moments confusion reigned, while everyone shrieked at everyone else in frantic excitement.

At last Mrs. Lorimer managed to make her voice heard above the tumult.

'Children, pull yourselves together for Heaven's sake. Robert, give the man a hand with your things. Mickie darling, *do* be careful, you nearly got Jane in the eye with that bat, and Robert, pay the taxi for me; and now both of you go straight upstairs and get ready for tea.

'Raspberries for tea,' put in Jane, and the whole family rushed whooping up the stairs.

Ten minutes later they were all sitting round the dining-room table. They were a pleasant looking family. An onlooker would have noticed a strong family likeness among them, but it was of expression rather than feature. Robert, the eldest, was nearly fourteen and a half. The general impression that he gave was one of neatness and sturdy reliability. His thick fair hair - mud-coloured, his mother called it - was brushed smoothly back from his forehead, dark brows

shaded eyes of steady grey, and his jaw set in a line of firm determination. Very different was the volatile Mickie, five years younger, whose wide mouth curled in a more or less permanent grin, and whose snub nose challenged the world with an arrogance all his own. He and Jane were twins, but no one would have guessed it, looking at Jane's fair hair and round pink face. Even her eyes, which were blue like Mickie's, were wide and earnest, whereas his sparkled with a thousand devils. As for Sally, she was an elusive person. Just thirteen, she was long-limbed and graceful, with a pointed face, slanting greenish eyes, Robert's neat, straight nose, and Robert's thick, nondescript-coloured hair, which, swept back in an unruly tangle, she had lately taken to tying up with various vivid ribbons.

The noise they made was considerable, for they all talked at once, and all as loudly as they could, in the vain hope of being heard. Actually, Mickie's strident tones were in little danger of being lost, but Jane also had a way of her own of gaining the family ear. She merely went on saying whatever she wanted to say in a quiet, determined voice, until by sheer force of repetition she made somebody listen. Thus presently they found that for a long time she had been saying:

'Mummy, shall we have - I say Mummy - Mummy, shall we have - Mummy, I say, shall we really have a boat of our own at Salcombe this year?'

The magic word Salcombe produced a chorus of excited shrieks from the rest of the family.

'I say, Mummy, what time's our train to-morrow?
Will James still be there, d'you think?'

George's Harry promised he'd take the fishing all night this year, same as Robert.'

'Ooh, can I come too?'

This last from Jane. As Mickie's twin she felt a proprietary interest in him, and regarded it as her especial right to share in all his doings.

'Course not!' exclaimed Mickie, puffed up with his first term at a prep school. 'Fishing is man's work.'

Jane's lip quivered, and Robert came to the rescue.

'What rot, Mike!' he said sharply. 'Sally goes fishing with me, doesn't she? If you won't take Jane with you she can jolly well come with us.'

There was a momentary silence, and everyone looked rather uncomfortable; everyone, that is, except Mickie, who grinned cheerfully and spoke with his mouth full.

'All right, all right, keep your hair on. Mummy, I say, I *must* have a pair of real long sea-boots, same as George's Harry has. Those beastly Wellingtons are no good at sea.'

'Darling, I really don't know,' said Mrs. Lorrimer. 'There'll be such a lot to buy.'

'Oh, I expect Daddy'll get me a pair when he comes. He *will* get home in time, won't he, Mummy?'

'Yes, darling, of course he will; you know he promised.'

'I wish we could all have gone to Cyprus,' said Sally suddenly, 'instead of him coming home to us.'

'Crikey, yes!' exclaimed Mickie. 'We'd probably have come in for a bit of fighting – why, we'd probably all have got blown up. Has Daddy been in any more ambushes, or anything, d'you think, Mummy? – OW!' He broke off with a yell of indignation, and glared at Robert.

'Keep your great hoof off my toe, can't you?'

'Shut up, you idiot,' said Robert, and Mrs. Lorimer, who had gone rather white at the mention of ambushes, laughed softly and gave him a grateful look.

The table by this time was almost cleared, and taking advantage of a moment's overfed silence, Mrs. Lorimer suggested a move upstairs. Settled in comfortable attitudes round the drawing-room, the children's talk turned again to the six weeks' visit to Salcombe that had taken place each summer ever since even Robert could remember.

It was Jane, presently, rising from a day-dream of mingled ice-cream cornets and midnight fishing, who realised that Mickie had disappeared from the room. Naturally it was Jane. Until three months ago, when he had gone away to school, the twins had never been separated. Everything they had, everything they did, had been shared, and together they had presented an unassailable front to the world. All through the term, Jane, lonely with a loneliness that neither Sally nor her mother could approach, had cheered herself with the thought of the summer holidays. She had drawn a whole page of little squares, one for each day of

the term, carefully blacked in each night, before she went to bed, and culminating on July 28th, painted bright yellow, with spiky rays of light springing from it.

On this magical day Mickie would come home, and all would be as before – Mickie, who had parted from her three months before as white of face, and as full of inexpressible emotions, as she herself had been. In his own exuberant way that was Mickie's and no one else's, he would bound into the hall, with eyes only for her. Such tales he would have to tell her, such plans to make, such – but somehow it wasn't working out quite like that. Jane swallowed hastily, set her jaw, and left the room as unobtrusively as she could. Instinct told her where to look for Mickie, and as she reached the top of the kitchen stairs his shrill voice was to be heard in boastful exclamation.

'Of course, we get it pretty rough down there sometimes, but once you know how to handle a boat – Oh, hullo, Jane. Look, this is Heidl, the new cook, of course it's spelt HEIDL, but you pronounce it HIDEEL, that's Austrian, she's Austrian, you know.'

'I know,' said Jane with admirable restraint. 'She's been here two months. She can yodel, can't you, Heidl?'

'Ach, Jane,' the plump and smiling Heidl threw up her hands. 'But so leetle.'

'Oh, go on, Heidl,' exclaimed Mickie. 'Let's hear you. Go on, yodel, DO.'

‘But the Gnädige Frau?’ Heidl was visibly weakening, and after a little more persuasion the kitchen echoed with the trill of clear fluting notes. Mickie could not remain silent whilst someone else made a noise and it was but a few moments before his piercing treble attacked the high notes experimentally. Jane joined in more softly, and they were in full force when the front door bell rang.

‘I’ll answer it! I’ll answer it!’ shrieked Mickie, and with Jane hard on his heels he raced up the stairs. A uniformed boy was standing at the door, and he handed them a yellow envelope.

‘Cable,’ he said briefly. ‘Any answer?’

‘Hooray! Daddy!’ they shouted simultaneously, and in another minute were thrusting it into their mother’s hands.

‘Open it quick, Mummy!’ ‘When’s he coming? What’s he say?’ They were too much excited to notice that Mrs. Lorrimer’s hands shook as she opened it, tearing the envelope almost in half, but something in her face as she began to read stilled even Mickie’s clamorous voice. For a long moment nobody spoke. Robert’s eyes sought and found Sally’s in a meaningful glance, and Jane’s hand crept into Mickie’s and was not repulsed. At last their mother lifted her eyes from the paper, and her face was white.

‘What’s up?’ said Robert hoarsely, with a suddenness that startled them all.

‘Darling – nothing much —’ Mrs. Lorrimer said, but

none of them believed her. 'It's only - it's only - Daddy - he's been hurt.'

'Hurt?'

'Yes - wounded - it's -' she bit her lips and looked round at the four scared faces. 'Darlings, don't worry, and don't look so frightened - it's - it's nothing bad. Now look, just run upstairs and start getting your things sorted. It's such a lot for Edith to do - up you go, and I'll call you presently.'

'But -' began Mickie, only to find himself propelled from the room by the ungentle hand of Robert, the girls obediently following.

Up in the schoolroom they looked at one another with awe-struck eyes.

'Some bust-up,' muttered Robert, uncertainly.

Sally twisted her handkerchief round and round in her hands, and said nothing.

'D'you suppose he's bad?' whispered Mickie, and Jane suddenly gave a loud snort.

'Shut up, Pug!' said Robert, not unkindly. 'There's nothing to snivel about. Mummy said he wasn't bad, didn't she?'

'I wish -' began Sally. 'I wish - Oh, I wish he'd never gone on that beastly Commission.'

'Wounded,' said Mickie, in an odd sort of voice. 'That means - shot, doesn't it! - not - not bombs or anything?'

'Oh, shut up!' cried Sally, and Robert said: 'No, Mike, not bombs.'

At that moment they heard the drawing-room door open, and Mrs. Lorrimer's voice, perfectly calm and ordinary, called: 'Robert! Come down a minute, will you?'

He bounded down the stairs, four at a time. In the drawing-room his mother was standing staring out of the window, but she did not look as if she was seeing anything outside.

'Robert,' she said, 'I'm afraid I've got to disappoint you all terribly, but I want you to help me all you can. You see - I shall have to leave to go out and look after Daddy. He'll need me. You see that, don't you?'

'Yes, of course, Mummy.'

'And you see that will mean no Salcombe. Shall you mind very much?'

'Gosh no, Mummy. Not so long - so long as —'

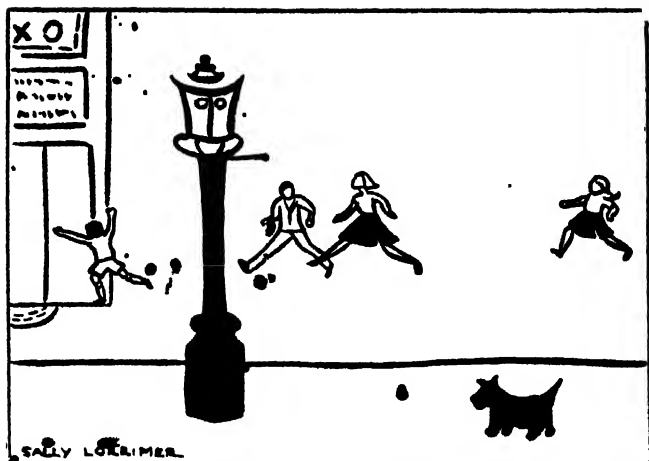
Somehow he couldn't finish what he meant to say, but his mother understood. 'It's all right, darling, Daddy's going to be all right. *I know it* - so there.' She said it with a sort of defiance that gave Robert tremendous courage. Then she turned briskly to her desk.

'Now there's a lot to be done. Ring up B.E.A., will you, and see what time the first plane leaves to-morrow morning, and what I do about booking a seat and everything. Then we must think what we're going to do about all of you. Of course, you can't stay here - London is no place for people's summer holidays, is it? Anyway, Edith goes on her holiday to-morrow. You can't go to Granny - not without me; she's not

strong enough to have you there after that go of bronchitis. Besides, if you did go you'd have to be so quiet it wouldn't be any fun for you. The only place you *can* go is Loch Don. You like staying with Aunt Mary, don't you?

'Yes, rather,' said Robert, and his spirits rose a little, because, though Loch Don was not Salcombe, it was Scotland, and Aunt Mary was young and gay.

'If only she was on the telephone we could ring her up now, but we'll send a wire off at once. I'll give you a cheque for twenty pounds which you can cash at the bank to-morrow morning. Then you can get the tickets and go up to-morrow evening. Remember, Robert, you'll be in charge of the others. Take care of them, and see that they have a good time.'



CHAPTER 2

AS THEY STOOD on the front door steps the next morning, a rather forlorn little party, waving till their mother's taxi was out of sight, Robert thought of those words of Mrs. Lorrimer's, and his shoulders felt bowed with responsibility and care.

'Take care of them, and see that they have a good time.'

He knew what that meant – see that they don't worry about Daddy. He looked at Jane's red-rimmed eyes and the unnaturally solemn expressions of Sally and Michael, and he saw that they instinctively turned to him – even the independent Mickie – and he felt older and more burdened than ever.

'What are we going to do?' asked Sally. 'It's too early to go to the bank, and anyway, we've got to wait for Aunt Mary's telegram.'

At that moment a cadenza of yodelling was wafted up from the basement, only to be hastily silenced, as though the owner of the voice had suddenly decided, as indeed she had, that a sound so gay was unsuited to the anxiety above stairs.

'I know!' exclaimed Mickie. 'Let's go and ask Heidi if she'll give us another yodelling lesson.'

'Oh yes! Oh yes!' cried Jane.

'All right,' said Robert thankfully. 'I suppose they can, can't they, Sally?'

He himself felt suddenly too care-worn for such pastimes, and Sally thus tacitly appealed to nodded her head quickly, and followed him up to the drawing-room, whilst the twins rushed noisily down to Heidi.

The kitchen was soon ringing with song and the clatter of dishes, but upstairs, where Robert sat gloomily studying cricket scores in *The Times*, and Sally with equal gravity painted a peculiar looking landscape with poster paints, such silence reigned that both jumped nearly out of their skins when the telephone rang.

'Aunt Mary,' said Robert, taking up the receiver.

'Yes,' Sally heard him say. 'Yes, that's right - all right, I'll take it down. "Lorrimer, Kensington 1171." Yes, "Sorry impossible" - Oh!'

He looked up blankly, then exclaimed: 'I say, are you sure? Would you just say that again,' and then: 'Oh - right - thanks awfully,' and slowly put down the receiver.

'What's the matter?' asked Sally.

'Some mess! Aunt Mary says: "Sorry impossible have children. Writing." - I bet she won't,' he added absently. Aunt Mary's vagueness was notorious in the family.

'Holy smoke,' exclaimed Sally. 'What on earth will we do now?'

'Goodness knows! I suppose we'd better see if Granny could have us after all.'

'Oh, Lor', how deadly.'

'I know, besides Mummy said . . .

'I say, Robert -

'What?'

'Why shouldn't we just stay here?'

'HERE? Don't be an ass.'

'Well, why not?'

'Oh, well, I don't know. Edith's going away, isn't she?'

'Well, Heidi would look after us all right, and anyway, Mummy said it wouldn't be good for Granny to have us, and we can't go to Aunt Mary, so what could we do? And after all, it is our *Home*.'

'Yes - but August in London! It would be pretty grim, wouldn't it?'

'Not for us. Robert, we always have fun, you know

we do – and with no grown-ups – Oh!’ she flushed suddenly. ‘What a beast I am!’

‘Rot! I know what you mean. It’s foul Daddy being ill; but we can’t help him or ourselves by moping about it. Mummy told us to have a good time and dash it, we will! Let’s call a council of war.’

Jane and Mickie, summoned, hot, pink and floury, from the kitchen were emphatic but divided in their opinions.

‘Oh, LET’S stay here, cried Mickie. ‘Do let’s. It would be awful at Eastwood with Granny ill, and we’ve never been in London by ourselves, and Edith’s going away and Heidl would let us do whatever we like. DO let’s, we could have a wizard time.’ Right through this Jane was repeating stolidly, over and over again: ‘Oh dear, what will they say? I’m sure we oughtn’t to, Oh dear!’

Robert wrinkled his brow and sighed heavily, as he looked from one to the other. Then he turned to Sally.

‘D’you think Mummy would mind?’

‘Oh, goodness no —’ Sally was beginning, but suddenly a wave of honesty checked her, and made her add cautiously: ‘At least – well – I don’t expect she’d like it exactly. I mean not if there was anything else, sort of – but as there isn’t anything else, and after all it isn’t as though we were children, at least not you and me.’ This last drew a resentful ‘I say —’ from Mickie, which was ignored by Robert, who added gloomily: ‘Well. I dunno.’

'Look!', said Sally. 'Let's all go for a walk now, and not talk about it any more, just let it go on, working itself out inside us all until this evening, then we can decide.'

'But what about Edith?' asked Jane suddenly, as that stern individual's voice was heard summoning Heidi to help her down with the trunks.

'Oh, Gosh! I'd forgotten her!' exclaimed Robert.

To Mickie, however, such problems as Edith presented no difficulties. 'There's no need to tell Edith anything at all. She's much too bossy, and anyway we haven't got anything to tell her until we've decided ourselves, and that won't be till this evening and she goes on her holiday this afternoon.'

'Oh, but —' began Jane, only to be interrupted by Robert. 'Look here, I really do think there's something in what Mike says. If Edith knows we aren't going she'll only have a fit of conscience and come all over awkward. She might wire Mummy, and I'm hanged if I'm going to have Mummy worried about this. She left us to look after ourselves, which meant she trusted us, and as Sally said, I do think we're old enough to decide things for ourselves.'

Before the others could say anything he strode to the door.

'Edith!' he called, in the voice of authority.

'Yes Robert, what is it? And hurry up do. Goodness knows how I shall get all this packing done anyhow and catch my coach this afternoon.'

• 'There was a heaven-sent opportunity. 'Don't bother,' said Robert airily. 'We've heard from Aunt Mary, and we can't go this evening anyhow, so there's no violent hurry. We can finish ourselves, if necessary.'

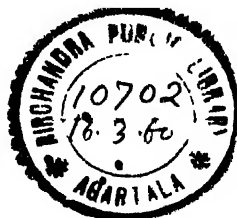
Edith's face, dark with suspicion, peered through the banisters. 'Now don't you worry,' began Robert hastily, before she had time to speak. 'We are having to change our plans slightly, but everything will be arranged all right. We're going out now to cash Mummy's cheque, but we'll come back and have lunch early and help Heidl to clear up, then you can go off in good time.'

Now Edith was an upright soul and devoted to the Lorrimers; she had been with their parents before even Robert was born. For a moment she really did not know what to do. It did not occur to her, from Robert's nonchalant tones, that the children were not going to their Aunt Mary at all, but thought their departure was postponed to the following day.

'Are you sure you'll be all right, Robert? I could put my sister off; but it's the coach bookings, we'd never be able to change them. After all it is only one night, and Heidl is a good sensible girl, though she never seems to understand what I say.'

'Of course we shall be all right,' said Robert. 'We're old enough to look after ourselves now, remember. You go and do your own packing, and don't worry about us.'

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A few hours later, having sped the rather reluctant Edith on her way, the children set forth with the vague and general idea of going to the Round Pond.

It was such a day as only London in the late summer can produce. The air was heavy and listless with heat and the tar on the roads wrapped itself stickily round the soles of their shoes. By the time they reached Kensington High Street, their clothes were clinging damply to them, and each had begun privately to wonder whether even the restrictions of Granny's house would not be better fun than this.

'Let's take a bus,' said Mickie suddenly.

'Where to?' asked Robert.

'Never mind - bet you I catch that one.' Mickie broke into a run and leapt on to a No. 73. The others followed him of necessity, Jane panting in the rear and having to suffer the final indignity of being dragged on to the bus by the conductor, with a kindly: 'Come along, dear, we 'aven't got all day, you know.'

They trooped upstairs and were lucky enough to find the front seats unoccupied.

'Where to?' asked the conductor.

'Well, we don't exactly know,' said Robert. 'We're only going for the ride. Where would be nice?'

'Well, now you're asking,' said the conductor. 'There's Putney Heath, and there's Barnes, and there's Richmond, but if I was your age I wouldn't want to go no farther than the River.'

'The River! Do you mean the Thames?'

‘Well, call it that if you like. London River’s good enough for me. There’s always something to see there always a bit of life on the River.’

‘Ooh, yes!’ cried the children. ‘Let’s go there.’

‘Right you are then. Two and two ’alve to ’Ammer-smith Bridge.’

Thus did Fate conceal herself in the tiffin paper of a bus-ticket, and in the choosing of a fourpenny bus-ride, the children’s whole holiday was chosen.



CHAPTER 3

IN THE SHADOW of Hammersmith Bridge, Robert, Sally, Michael and Jane leaned over a wall and gazed upon the swirling muddy waters of the London River. The tide was flowing strongly, and with it the life of the river was in full flood. A tug-boat, wrapped round with huge frayed fenders of rope, yawned her way under the bridge with lowered funnel and a burst of smoke, and ranged in her wake were six barges, two and two, like a neatly regimented family out for a walk. Closely following came a spotless Dutch motorship, filling the air with the noisy chug-chug-chug of her Diesel engines, her stumpy mast lying flat and her

captain keeping a wary eye to see that her top layer would clear the arches of the bridge.

Next came a scarlet tug, valiantly hauling three huge lighters, their decks awash and their holds battened down; and then, from the opposite direction, butting the tide with her sharp and shallow prow, a pleasure-steamer, crowded with eager sightseers. For a moment it seemed to the children that tug and steamer would collide, so swiftly they advanced upon one another. The former, however, announced with two peremptory hoots that she was directing her course to port and, swinging gracefully outwards, passed on without mishap.

For some time the children watched this fascinating procession in silent rapture. Then Mickie, peering up the river, at the imminent risk of precipitating himself on to the shingle below, exclaimed: 'I say, there's a boat-yard up there, let's go and explore it.'

To all four the word 'boat' was an irresistible magnet, and they set off up the road at an excited gallop. It was indeed a boat-yard - a boat-yard of most fascinating kind. Strewn on the shingle and moored in the tide, was every sort and description of small boat - old boats, new boats, motor-boats, rowing-boats, sailing-boats, canoes, little boats, big boats, bad boats, whole boats and half boats. A glorious disarray they leaned or floated. The only visible means of approach to this paradise was a narrow gangway that led down steeply from the wall, arriving eventually at a series of landing-

stages that had once been barges, and upon one of which was built a dark and ancient shed.

Although they had lived in London all their lives, it had never occurred to the Lorrimers that such a place existed, as it were, at their very door. They knew the neat disciplined waters of the Serpentine and the lake in Regent's Park, where you could indulge in a little genteel rowing in vessels that were mockeries of boats after those they had known at Salcombe. No, London was a place of cinemas and streets, shops and exhibitions – of school for the girls, and of transit to school for the boys. And now, behold – after all these wasted years, they had found, it seemed, a sort of Salcombe in London. Not so easily, however, did London, mother of restrictions, allow herself to be forgotten; the gangway to the boat-yard was guarded by a gate, newly painted in bright green, and on the gate, also almost offensive in the newness of its paint, hung a notice:

NO ADMITTANCE EXCEPT
ON BUSINESS

'Oh dear,' said Jane. 'It's no good, you can never go anywhere in London without being a trespasser.'

'Can't you just!' exclaimed Mickie. 'Watch me,' and he vaulted airily over the gate and proceeded down the gang-plank. The clatter and creaking of his progress was not such as to go unnoticed, even in that place of varied noises, and the anxious eyes of his brother and

sisters saw a round face peering from the darkness of the shed.

'Nah then!' said the Face. 'What do you want?'

'Oh, Good Morning,' came Mickie's shrill tones, nonchalantly polite. 'You sell boats, don't you?'

'I do,' the Face replied, and added meaningly: 'To them as 'as money to buy 'em.'

'Well' - and not so much as the shadow of a blush mantled the innocent cheeks of Mickie. 'Well, my brother and sisters and I are thinking of buying a boat. You don't mind if we look round a bit, do you?'

Unexpectedly, the Face broke into a grin, and was at the same time embodied with a stout, paint-stained figure, clad in tattered shirt-sleeves, and tight, solid-looking tweed trousers, well patched.

'Course not, milord,' said this apparition. 'Ow many was you thinkin' of buyin'?''

'Oh, not more than a dozen,' grinned Mickie, and turned to wave encouragingly to the others: 'Come on, you chaps!'

Robert, Sally and Jane scrambled with one accord over the gate, to be greeted by their unabashed brother with the somewhat surprising remark: 'I say, this is Mr. Larch, and he thinks he's got a boat that might do for us.'

'Dash it!' muttered Robert, and: 'But, Mickie —' began Jane; but Mickie silenced them with a couple of well-directed kicks, and Sally was already shaking Mr.

Larch's panty hand and murmuring vaguely: 'I'm so glad to meet you, and I *should* like to see the boat. We've always wanted a boat of our own, you know.'

Whether it was the effect of that hand-shake, given so trustingly, or of Robert's sensible and honest countenance, would be hard to say, but the last shreds of hostility fell from Mr. Larch as he looked at them, and he turned invitingly towards the shed.

'Well,' he said, 'if you'd like to see something worth seeing, come and 'ave a look in 'ere.'

They followed him into the dim interior. All around was chaos indescribable, tools and shavings, boat gear, spars and paint-pots littered floor and benches alike, sails drooped from the ceiling, oars leaned drunkenly in corners, and in the midst of it all was a boat.

Four pairs of eyes widened with envy as they looked at her; four mouths gaped with admiration. She was indeed a thing of beauty. Fifteen feet perhaps, over all from stem to stern, with a curving bow and a blunt workman-like stern; below the water-line she was black, but the smooth overlapping planks above were painted a vivid emerald green; a small half-deck for'ard gleamed whitely, and inside, the clean-looking wood was protected by a coating of golden varnish. Spruce as a model yacht, she looked, but it was easy to see that she was at the same time a tough, sturdy little boat, who could stand up to rough weather and hold her own in deeper waters than those of the London River.

'Nice boat,' said Robert inadequately, at last.

'Crumbs!' exclaimed Mickie. 'That's a tidy little craft, if ever there was one.'

'Heaven!' was Sally's brief comment.

'Bet she's pretty fast, too,' added Mickie, and Jane continued to stare.

'Yes,' said Mr. Larch meditatively. 'A nice bit of work, she is — not above a few years old, built by a man as knew 'ow to build them. A real Master-Builder, 'e must 'ave been. As you say, son, as tidy a little craft as you would want to see.'

'Where did you get her?' asked Robert.

'Chap going in for those there Hinternational dinghy racin' — more fool 'im. Brought 'er round from the south coast, sailed 'er a season up 'erc, now he wants to get rid of 'er and go in for this posh mahogany stuff up the river. Going dirt cheap, too. I done 'er up meself, careful as if she was me own child, 'cos I took a fancy to 'er. She's sound as a bell all through. Ah, a bargain she is.'

'What do you want for her?' asked Robert hoarsely, licking lips suddenly dry.

'Twenty quid to you, young gent, and worth double.'

'I beg your pardon,' interposed Sally, 'did you say twenty —'

'Twenty quid, twenty good honest pounds and she's yours.'

For one brief electric moment Robert's eyes met and held Sally's, then each turned quickly away. Twenty

pounds was the exact sum reposing in Robert's pocket, the sum left with them by their mother for the fares to Scotland, the fares that were now not needed.

'Look here,' said Robert, with an abruptness that took them all by surprise, 'we shall have to think this over. Good-bye, Mr. Larch, and thank you. We'll come back to-morrow morning and let you know what we've decided. Come on, you.'

'Here, I say —' began Mickie, but it was he this time who was silenced by a meaning kick and elbowed unceremoniously from the shed where he had hoped to spend the rest of the day in pleasant converse.

'Come on,' repeated Robert firmly, and shepherded his brother and sisters up the gang-plank with a stern, set face.

'You *are* a beastly spoil-sport,' grumbled Mickie, as they walked towards the bus-stop. 'Why on earth did you suddenly get the wind up like that? He knew perfectly well we weren't going to buy the boat, but he didn't mind, he'd have let us stay there all afternoon if you hadn't been so stupid.'

'Oh dear,' sighed Jane, speaking for the first time; 'she was such a lovely boat, and her name was *Esmeralda*. Such a lovely name!'

Robert and Sally looked at one another in silence. For a while they let the twins babble on unchecked, complaining, arguing, recriminating, and boasting of how they would have handled the affair. Then Robert breathed heavily and spoke.

'Suppose we did buy that boat?'

The whole party stopped dead in its tracks,

'Ooh, ROBERT!' said Jane.

'You're nuts!' observed Mickie, but 'without conviction. 'How could we possibly raise twenty pounds – OH!' light dawned suddenly upon him – 'Holy smoke! Of course, the journey money.'

'Yes,' said Robert. 'The journey money. The question is, ought we to use it?'

'No,' said Jane immediately, who was burdened with a conscience so inconveniently active that it frequently had to do duty for them all.

'Oh, Jane!' exclaimed Sally mournfully. 'Don't you, really think so?'

'Oh, dear!' However, clearly, you may know your duty it doesn't always make you want to do it, and Jane's face puckered with anguish as the vision of the *Esmeralda* rose tantalisingly clear in her mind. 'Oh dear, no. I'm sure we oughtn't to.'

'Oh, rot!' Mickie's conscience was as elastic as Jane's was unyielding. 'Mummy gave it us to spend, so it really *ought* to be spent somehow.'

'Well,' murmured Sally, 'I don't think you can quite say that.'

'No,' said Jane decidedly, and 'No,' echoed Robert. 'It's rot, of course. But I do think,' he went on, 'Mummy wouldn't mind our using it in a way. I mean, she gave it to us to go to Scotland, to make up for not going to Salcombe, didn't she?'

'Yes,' said the girls.

'So it really *is* ours,' put in Mickie.

'No,' repeated Robert, 'it isn't exactly ours, but, well, we're still not going to Salcombe, and now we're not going to Scotland either, and we don't look like having much fun.'

'And Mummy likes us to have fun.'

'In fact,' added Mickie righteously, 'she'd be disappointed if we didn't.'

'They always said we could have a boat of our own this summer.'

'And it does seem,' Sally went on, 'as if it would be a wicked waste to let that lovely boat go to some horrible stranger, who probably wouldn't appreciate her, and would just paddle up and down a pond in her — and stick on the mud — and —'

'And tear her sails —

'And chip her lovely new paint —

'And keep her in a muck —'

'And —' Sally's green eyes widened as she considered the final horror. 'And they might even *change her name*.'

'Oh, we must have her!' cried Robert in anguish.

'We simply must,' echoed Sally, and: 'We will,' shouted Mickie. 'Hands up!'

For one long minute they stood in silence in the middle of Hammersmith. Three hands stuck stiffly in the air. Three pairs of eyes fixed themselves on the scarlet and stricken countenance of Jane.

‘Oh, Jane, can’t you?’ implored Sally.

‘Oh dear,’ said Jane. ‘I don’t believe we *ought* to, really I don’t.’

‘Look,’ said Robert, with sudden inspiration, ‘we’ve all got lots of money in the Post Office Savings Bank. I’m sure we’ve got more than twenty pounds between us. If Mummy and Daddy say we shouldn’t have bought the boat we can pay it back out of that – and she’ll still be OURS!’

Slowly, as a slate is wiped clean with a sponge, the anguish cleared from Jane’s face, to be replaced by a slow ecstatic beam.

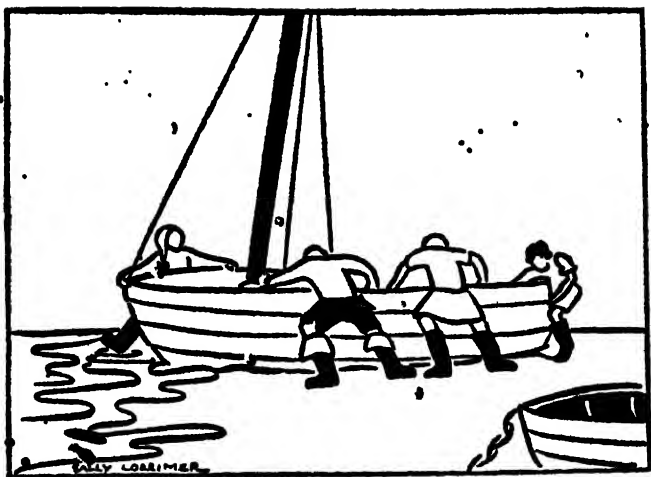
‘Oh!’ she said. ‘I believe that would be all right – I really do! But OH — !’

The hearts of her sister and brothers sank again, as the renewed puckering of Jane’s face indicated a further rising of her conscience. In agonised suspense they waited for her words, that came blurting out at last.

‘We – we’ve never *decide*!! I mean – we haven’t settled yet whether we’re going to stay in London.’

But this was too much. Of conscience, as of all good things, it is possible to have more than enough.

‘That,’ said Sally firmly, as she thrust her sister on to a bus, ‘has settled itself – *Esmeralda* is an omen, and we are staying in London.’



CHAPTER 4

EDITH HAD LEFT by the time the children got home. They were hot and dusty and tired as they trailed up the front-door steps. Thoughts of the *Esmeralda* and all her glories had kept their spirits up on the way back from Hammersmith, but as Robert put his latch-key into the door, their hearts sank a little. The house felt so empty. Their mother was always so pleased to see them, and they would burst in at the study door where Daddy was enjoying a whisky and soda after a long day at the office, and he would say: "What in the name of the Holy Pagoda have you been up to?" and they would tell him. Oh, if only he were there, they had so much to tell him.

Robert shut the door with a crash that echoed down the empty hall.

'Well,' said Sally forlornly, 'I suppose we'd better ask Heidi for some tea.'

Even as she spoke, Heidi herself came pounding up the kitchen stairs, in full flow of conversation before she was even in sight.

'Robert, Sally, liebe kinder, how how you must be, how weary, nicht?' Also, you must eat and drink and all will be besser. The milk, all day he has in the ice-house been, and Heidi has the chocolate tortoise-cake made. Ist gut, ja?'

'Oh, yes, Heidi,' they said brightening already at this hearty welcome.

'So, and where shall we have him? In the drawing-room like noble folk, or in my kitchen where I have the blue-and-white cloth?'

It seemed absurd to use the drawing-room when the kitchen and its genius were so sumptuously inviting.

'Kitchen for me!' cried Mickie.

'And me,' echoed the faithful Jane.

'Kitchen it is,' Robert and Sally agreed, and Robert added: 'I should think we might as well shut up the drawing-room, while — Oh, Sally, I say —'

'What?'

'We've got to break it to Heidi,' muttered Robert in a conspiratorial whisper. 'That we're staying here, I mean.'

'I say, do you think she'll mind?'

'Dunno — break it gently in the middle of tea,' He raised his voice. 'Come on, Mike, you hog, you can't have tea in that state. Bet you I'm ready before you!'

In a very few minutes they were gathered round the kitchen table, with a pink and beaming Heidl presiding over the tea-pot, and several large bottles of creamy-looking milk.

After the first pangs of starvation had been warded off, Robert nudged Sally. She looked rather uncomfortable, opened her mouth once or twice, and finally plunged into speech.

'Heidl — I say —'

'Ja, mein Liebling.'

'Heidl — supposing — I mean, would it — ? Well —'

'Oh, come on, Sally,' interposed Robert impatiently. 'What she's trying to say, Heidl, is that Aunt Mary can't have us, so we thought we'd stay here if you could manage it.'

Under the anxious gaze of four pairs of eyes, Heidl's mouth curved into a delighted smile.

'But, where else should you stay, kinder?' she cried. 'Is it not your home here? Na, dass ist aber wunderbar! We shall be so happy, — and for Heidl no lonely weeks of caretaking all by herself.'

'Hooray!' cried the children, and: 'Good for you, Heidl!' added Mickie approvingly.

'One thing,' said Robert: 'we'll have to send a tele-

'gram to Mummy, otherwise she won't know where to write to us.'

This was done immediately after tea, and what with helping Heidl, planning the purchase of the *Esmeralda*, and one thing and another, bedtime came before anybody had time to feel sad or lonely again.

The next morning, Mickie was bent on departing to Hammersmith as soon as he had swallowed his breakfast. The rest of the family, however, felt the stern call of duty, and roused him to indignant protests by pointing out that they couldn't expect to have all the fun and leave Heidl to do all the work.

Still, even dusting proved to have new possibilities as organised by Heidl. She handed out a duster of different coloured checks to each of them, taught them a rousing marching song, and led them through the rooms with her own stirring contralto.

The morning's work gave the Lorrimers an entirely new point of view of their own familiar rooms. Sally and Jane had shared their pretty white room, with its gay flowery chintz, so long that they hardly noticed what was in it, but to-day as they dusted each nook and cranny they noticed all sorts of little things; and as Jane reverently tidied the yew-wood collection of tiny animals and charms that ornamented the mantelpiece, she had a sudden pang for poor Edith who had to dust all these every day, and did so without a murmur of complaint. As they made their beds Heidl told them how,

in her country, instead of pink silk counterpanes; little girls slept under enormous billowing feather *duvets*.

Upon Jane's bed lived every woolly creature she had ever loved, some of them featureless now with the hard wear of many years' loving hugging. Sally had recently discarded hers, and secretly she sometimes felt that the elegant nightdress-case, in pink quilted satin, that now ornamented her bed, was a poor substitute for all her old companions.

Very different was the boys' room. This was not really very large, but gave an impression of spaciousness, as the furniture had all been planned by Major Lorrimer and built into the walls as in a ship's cabin. The curtains were of a rough, dark blue material, covered with a pattern of knotted rope, and the beds were made like bunks above half a dozen drawers. Robert was neat and tidy by nature, and forced Mickie to keep some semblance of order, but he was not entirely successful. The pictures on the walls were attractive old prints of barques and clippers, but over Mickie's bunk hung a vivid if inaccurate impression of a large racing car, drawn by himself and inserted into a quite unsuitable gilt frame.

Once they had got their own rooms in order Heidi assured them that she could manage the rest of the house by herself. She produced a huge pie, crisp and fragrant from the oven, packed it into their basket with enough good things to feed an army, and despatched

'them with a flood of exhortations to 'Eat well and sail good.'

It was nearly half-past eleven by the time they arrived at the green gate of Mr. Larch's 'boat-yard. The sun was shining with unabated heat, and the swift waters of the river twinkled at them as invitingly as ever. Hardly able to contain themselves for excitement, they scrambled in a body up the short flight of steps to the top of the wall. Here Mickie paused, and resting one foot on the gate, let forth through his cupped hands a hoarse and hideous scream, that was his interpretation of an Austrian yodel.

Almost immediately the red, suspicious face of Mr. Larch appeared round the shed door. As his eye lighted on the four Lorrimers, however, the suspicion was replaced by an expression of blank amazement.

'Blimey!' he said. 'If it ain't 'is Lordship come back again. Wotcher after this time? A bloomin' liner?'

'No!' shrieked the children with one voice. 'We've come to buy the *Esmeralda*.'

'Yer've — Well, I'll be —' It had never occurred to Mr. Larch for a moment that the Lorrimers were serious in their intention of buying the boat. Little had he suspected them of being the proud — if not undisputed — possessors of twenty pounds. Even now his native caution was not entirely dimmed.

''Ere,' he said, 'let's 'ave a sight of yer money first. Then we can talk.'

'Oh, certainly,' said Robert, rather piqued at this

mistrust. 'Let's see now, where did I put it?' And reaching into his pocket, he waved a bundle of crisp new notes carelessly under Mr. Larch's nose.

'Well, I'll be —' Once again the boat-builder's astonishment bereft him of words suitable to the occasion.

'Oh, come on!' cried Mickie impatiently. 'Where is she? Let's see her! We want to go sailing this morning.'

'Yes, do buck up,' echoed the others.

'Or' right, or' right, you shall see'er,' and he turned and led the way into the dim, delightful-smelling interior of his shed.

The actual buying of the *Esmeralda* was a complicated but glorious proceeding. Once over his astonishment, Mr. Larch proved himself a shrewd and hard-headed business-man. He had more than met his match, however, in Robert, who had once heard his father remark that only a fool pays the price he is asked for a horse or a boat. Finally Robert succeeded in beating Mr. Larch down from his original figure of twenty pounds to a mere seventeen pounds ten. To this was added, after further haggling, the sum of ten shillings, as an advance payment for one month's moorings off the yard.

Once the bargain was fairly struck, however, and the sordid question of money disposed of, the boat-builder showed himself in a very different light. He fully understood the children's desire to set sail immediately,

'and leaving someone else's boat half-painted, set to to help them rig *Esmeralda*. This proved itself, indeed, a task that they could hardly have accomplished unaided: She had first to be carried, with the assistance of several onlookers, out of the shed, and down to the water's edge. Here the short heavy mast was stepped, and each stay adjusted to a tension that accorded to the minutest degree with Mr. Larch's considered judgment. 'A good rake to the mast,' he pronounced to be indispensable to the perfect sailing of this particular boat, and to this end he instructed the children to 'Loosen up the forestay all she'll give.' The proper lengths once decided upon, he taught them the painful, prickly art of wire-splicing.

Rudder and tiller were then fetched from their murky hiding-places, and laid ready by the after-thwart. Last of all came the berthing of the sail. This being a sliding gunter, an unaccustomed rig to the Lorrimers, their mentor showed them how to shackle the wire end of the halyard round the gaff so as to get the correct balance, and made fast the foot of the boom by a complicated contrivance of ropes and blocks, to the foot of the mast. The foresail was then clipped to a shackle at the extreme end of the bow, the halyard knotted at its head, and the sheets threaded through rings on the inside of the boat. Finally the mainsheet was made fast to the end of the boom with a double turn, and rove through a double block on the iron horse that topped the transom. Then Mr. Larch stepped back with a satis-

fied sigh. At long last the good ship *Esmeralda* lay ready on the shingle, glowing in all the glorious newness of her green paint.

The children's hearts swelled as they looked at her, and even the knobby, hardened old heart of Mr. Larch expanded a little.

'Well,' he said at last, 'there you are. Now then. Wot abaht a sail?'

'Bags I steer first!' shrieked Mickie suddenly.

'OH NO! Oh no!' cried Jane. 'I'm the youngest, it ought to be me!'

'Rot, you can't sail a boat, anyway!'

'I can! I can!'

'Neither of you can.' This from Sally. 'Of course it'll be Robert - eldest first.'

'Now look here,' interposed Robert judicially, 'it's no good carrying on like this. We've got to arrange ourselves into a proper crew with captain and mate, and swear obedience to our officers. Otherwise we'll never do any good at all. Daddy always says you can never get anywhere without discipline at sea.'

This effectively quietened the clamour, and finally, with some demur from Mickie, who rather felt the office to be more suitable to himself, Robert was elected captain. After a good deal more argument, Mr. Larch being called upon to adjudicate, appointed Sally and Mickie first and second mate respectively, while Jane, refusing to be fobbed off with the inferior office of bos'n, bestowed upon herself the proud title of Able

'Seamen, who collectively, as she carefully explained, are at least as important as the captain.

These vital points settled, it took no more than a moment for the four eager pairs of hands, assisted always by Mr. Larch, to drag the *Esmeralda* down to the shore, till the first small waves of the river were lapping round her shining green bottom.

'Now,' said Mr. Larch, 'you've got 'an off-shore wind, and a strongish ebb-tide. I should 'oist yer foresail, get yer mainsail all ready for 'oisting, and two of yer stand by the 'alyards, another by the centre-plate, and you, Mister Captain, stand by to fix the rudder as soon as yer've shoved orf into deep enough water. I'd go up-stream if I was you. Yer won't make much 'eadway, but yer will 'ave the tide to bring yer 'ome.'

He had scarcely finished speaking before the impatient Mickie was hauling at the foresail halyard. Sally and Jane, who were sufficiently punctilious to await their captain's instructions, were ordered to the main halyard and centre-plate respectively, while Robert himself, plunging into the water in his last year's Salcombe sea-boots, helped Mr. Larch give the final shove that launched *Esmeralda*.

After a few wild flaps, the foresail, obedient to Mickie's firm hand on the sheet, bellied out in a beautiful curve and took charge. Robert, scrambling into the boat, shipped the rudder, fixed the tiller, and in a moment they were out in mid-stream. Here they en-

countered the full force of the tide, which swept them down-stream broadside-on at an alarming rate.

'Haul away, Sally!' shouted Robert.

The boat rocked with the force of the wildly flapping mainsail as Sally, helped by Jane, hauled away at the main halyard. At last their shouts of 'Belay,' scarcely audible above the clamour, told that they had made fast, and Robert, with an answering shout of: 'Mind your heads! I'm going to fill her,' pulled the tiller hard over, and grasped the mainsheet.

As if by magic, the chaos of flapping canvas and thrashing sheets was stilled. Slowly the white sails filled and the lee gunwale went down, and the only sound to be heard in the sudden silence was the lap-lap-lap of the water under the swift-moving hull.

It would be impossible to describe the magic of that first sail. The progress they made was actually little or none, for the ebb swirled about them with totally unexpected force. There was sufficient breeze, however, to enable them to make gradual headway, and this, combined with the swift-moving tide, gave all the effect of speed. *Esmeralda* heeled over, her sail taut with the force of the wind, and the tiller kicked in Robert's hand as if it were alive and straining to be free. The sun shone, making sparkling silver of the muddy Thames. London faded away and was forgotten. They were in another world, another day, another age.

'Gosh,' said Mickie at last. 'This is as good as Salcombe, any day.'

‘Better,’ chorused the others.

At this moment a long, hoarse hoot reminded them that there were others in this enchanted world, and presently a pleasure steamer chugged by on their star-board hand, leaving a wash reminiscent of a strong sea over the bar at Salcombe. Soon after followed a tug towing the usual string of barges, and as the children turned to watch her go by, the master waved and shouted cheerful pleasantries at them from the bridge.

Then, as they waved and shouted back, a new and thrilling realisation came to them. They were spectators no longer. The tug-master had waved to ~~them~~, not in charity as to landlubbers on a bridge, but with the familiarity of a master-mariner to his fellows. They were part now of the brotherhood of the London River, and the hand of every man who sailed upon it was theirs to claim in friendship.

Even as they considered this stirring thought, a sudden cold feeling about their feet made them all look down, to see the water lapping above the floor-boards.

‘Man the pumps!’ yelled Mickie. ‘She’s sinking!’

His tones instilled panic into the heart of the Able Seamen. Simultaneously the twins dived for the bilge-pump that lay just inside the locker, and their heads met with a resounding crack.

‘Serve you right, fat-heads!’ said the captain, rocking with laughter at the tiller. ‘It’s a shocking thing, Mister,’ he continued over his shoulder to Sally, ‘when a responsible officer starts a panic among the crew.’

'Panic my foot!' exclaimed the indignant Mickie. 'I merely pointed out that she's half-full of water.'

'Of course she is, you ass,' said Robert. 'She's been out of the water for weeks. She's bound to take up a bit. Actually I should think she's pretty tight by now.'

He proved to be right. A surreptitious, but careful watch kept by the Able Seamen could detect little or no further rising of the waters, and they proceeded upstream without further alarms as far as the training ship *Stork*, which lies moored at a bend of the river. There the skipper, consulting his watch, and feeling a distinct emptiness in the midriff, decided that it was time to be turning homeward.

They bore away, and with the wind aft and the tide beneath them raced down the river at an amazing speed, covering in five minutes what had taken them over half an hour on the way up. It was Jane's hand that brought *Esmeralda* neatly alongside the landing-stage, while Sally carefully and slowly lowered the mainsail and Mickie gathered in the heavy folds as they came down, to save them falling into the water.

Robert, having jumped ashore and made fast, gazed with fond pride upon his vessel.

'Now,' he said, 'we've got to stow the sails and make her all ship-shape for the morning.'

They all set to with a will, nor did they bid good night to *Esmeralda* till she was as spotless and shining, inside and out, as when they launched her that afternoon.



CHAPTER 5

'JUST THINK,' said Jane, 'as they stood at the green gate next morning. 'We've got the whole day before us.'

'And lots to eat,' added Mickie.

By a perfectly stupendous effort on everybody's part, they had managed to arrive at Hammersmith at ten o'clock. There were still some hours of the flood tide to run, and they decided to take full advantage of this by sailing up-river as far as they could get in the time, with the happy knowledge that the ebb would be running all afternoon to bring them home again.

Mr. Larch had moved *Esmeralda* so that she was afloat, and she made a pretty sight bobbing about in

the water. Such pride of ownership rose up within them, that memories of Salcombe and thoughts of sea-side pleasures faded before the rapture of surveying their very own boat. The springy gang-plank jogged beneath their eager feet, and Mr. Larch appeared blinking from his dark hide-out to cry: 'Steady! Steady! Can't 'ave you all fallin' in the mud!'

Robert gave his directions.

'Jane, you stow the food in *Esmeralda*, Sally, get the oars from the boat-house, Mickie the rudder, and I'll bring the sails.'

'I'll help you with the sails,' said Mickie. 'I can manage the rudder with one hand.'

'No yer don't, me lad,' chimed in Mr. Larch sternly. 'You've 'eard your capting's orders. Nah you jump to it an' no more argufying.'

Considerably taken aback, Mickie picked up the rudder and marched off without another word. The children quickly realised that Mr. Larch, as a disciplinarian, was not to be trifled with. He had been brought up himself in a hard school, where no order was repeated more than once, and if you had to be taught something twice, the second lesson was emphasised with a rope's end. He saw in the Lorrimer children promising material, and was determined that it should not be ruined by any misplaced indulgence on his part.

He was quick to notice Robert's hopeful glances towards him as he fingered the sails. Unwilling to lower

the captain's prestige by a direct snub, he hastily forestalled any questions.

'Well, mates, I shown yer 'ow to do everything yesterday, so you won't be needin' me to-day. I'll get on wiv a bit o' paintin',' and he bustled away, back into the shed.

Robert understood the implied challenge, and squared his shoulders.

'Come on now, we've got to get under way in double quick time to-day.'

Spurred by the knowledge that Mr. Larch's beady eye was peering at them through the paint-stained windows of his workshop, the crew of the *Esmeralda* performed prodigies. Nobody fell over anybody else, nobody dropped anything, nobody lost his or her temper. They all managed to remember exactly what they had done the day before, and do it again, twice as well and twice as quickly; and in less than twenty minutes Jane was tying, with careful fingers, the last figure of eight stopper knot on the jib sheets, and *Esmeralda* was ready for sea once more.

Mickie untied the painter, and Robert swung the tiller over.

'Let go the centre-plate,' he cried, and *Esmeralda* headed away from the conglomeration of boats to which she was tied, and out through the water, her sails nicely balanced to the wind. It was such a satisfactory sensation that all the children were silent.

The tide was flowing fast, so that they appeared to be

travelling at terrific speed over the land, and whereas yesterday, with wind and tide against them, it had taken an interminable time to reach the *Stork*, to-day, the tide beneath them, they slipped by the great ship without effort. In addition it was a regular 'soldier's wind,' broad on the beam, making it possible to lay an easy course up or down river.

They had not been sailing long when Sally pointed and said: 'Look, you'd never think that was London!' Following her finger they saw a verdant stretch of land, lush with grass and meadow-sweet, and thick with close-growing shrubs.

'I expect it's somebody's private garden,' said the practical Jane.

'I believe it's an island,' cried Sally. 'An enchanted island!'

'Enchanted island, my foot,' scoffed Mike. 'Though it might be an island, mind you. There's an arm of water stretching up, but perhaps it's only an archipellimagig.'

'Archipelago, you mean, stupid,' said Sally, getting her own back.

'Oh, all right, I know! That was wit, that was.'

'Stow it,' said Robert. 'We'll go and explore, and remember - silence when approaching enemy territory.'

The little ship slipped quietly through the water, and not a word was said except a whispered: 'Up centre-plate!' from Robert. He directed their course through

the shallowing water into a little bay. The bottom grounded softly, and Mickie jumped into the water making a mighty splash.

'Qui-et, you idiot, this may be private - it may be anything. All get out, and we'll run *Esmeralda* up the shore.'

They pulled with a will until *Esmeralda* squatted high and dry, like a large, complacent green duck. Then, following Robert, they crept in single file up the bank, which hung like a miniature cliff above the shore. Once on top they lay flat and wriggled forward Indian fashion, their bright eyes peering through the long grass and their ears strained, for every moment they expected to hear the voice of Authority call: 'Come out of there! What are you up to?' There was no sound, however, and every instinct telling them that they were alone on the island, they stood up.

There was no sign of human habitation - no horrid notices saying:

TRESPASSERS WILL BE
PROSECUTED

or

NO LITTER

Better still, there was no litter.

"It's rather nice, isn't it?" said Robert.

'Nice!' breathed Sally. 'It's wonderful! Why, I believe it's an island dropped straight from Heaven specially for us.'

'Oh, do you think so?' asked Jane earnestly. 'I don't mean dropped from Heaven, of course, but do you think we could call it really our own?'

'I say,' interrupted Mickie, 'I've got a simply terrific idea!'

They listened, for the family had learnt that it was no good ignoring Mickie's ideas. They were always delivered in such a loud and penetrating voice, and no power on earth could arrest the flood of speech until he had finished what he wished to say.

'We've got our own boat, but what's a boat without a harbour? Mr. Larch's boat-yard is all right, but it belongs to too many people. This could be OUR harbour, our home port! We can make a camp, and keep things here - spare gear, and things to eat.'

'Oh, Mickie, how lovely!' cried Jane. 'We could make fires and cook things, and —'

Here Sally took up the theme: 'And bring the tents here, and perhaps sleep here.'

'Hold hard,' said Robert. 'There's something in what old Mike says, but we mustn't put the cart before the horse. First we've got to survey every inch of this island, and see if it's suitable. Then, if it is, we've got to find the best site for our camp. Then we must make a secret hiding-place if we're going to leave things here, in case anyone else comes along. Come on, we'll work our way from east to west, and mind, not a word. We're not far from the mainland, and we don't want people seeing us before we know where we are. We

should look pretty silly if this turned out to be somebody's kitchen garden.'

They spread out in line, and crouching down, cautiously surveyed the whole island. It was about one hundred and fifty yards long by fifty broad, closely covered with thick-growing grass and weeds, and shaded by willow trees. Cut off from the north bank of the river by a narrow neck of water, it was as wild and undisturbed as if the busy city were miles away, and it seemed even to Robert that the hand of civilisation could hardly pursue them here.

They were not long in discovering an ideal place for their camp. This was a small clearing of turf, screened on the London side by tangled undergrowth and shrubs, while on the Surrey side the whole broad sweep of the River Thames separated them from their fellow-men.

They sprawled in the grass and contemplated this haven of solitude and security. The hum of the traffic was very distant, and the indescribable London smell that is dust, petrol, rubber and tarmac was ousted by the strong, satisfying aroma of the mud of the London River. They sniffed delightedly, and said: 'It's almost as good as the sea.'

Robert came to earth first, and, looking at his watch, said:

'I say, you chaps, we must put to sea again. We're missing all the tide. We'll come back to-morrow and build our harbour. What shall we call it?'

Names of every sort were put forward, exotic and strange sounding, but finally the only one to which Robert and Jane would agree was 'Port Lorrimef,' and that was decided upon.

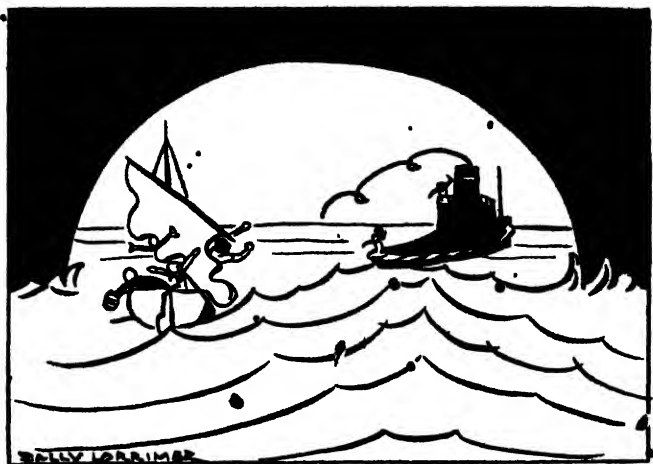
The tide had risen and was lapping around *Esmeralda's* stern, so that they had no difficulty in getting her afloat once more, and it was the work of a moment to hoist the sails they had lowered so hastily, and to get under way.

This time it was Mickie who had the tiller, but Robert, seeing Jane's longing glance directed at her twin, was seized with an inspiration.

'Look here, chaps,' he said. 'Fair's fair, and everybody must have a turn at everything. A properly run ship works in watches, so we'll set two watches, with a responsible officer in each. Jane and I will take the starboard watch and Sally and Mike the port. Each watch can do an hour at a time; that'll be half an hour at the tiller, and half an hour at the jib sheets. How's that?'

'O.K. by me,' said Mickie, with a grin. 'I suppose I'm the responsible officer in our watch?'

'You'll be the responsible officer in irons if you don't pay more respect to your seniors!' cried Sally, thumping her brother over the head.



CHAPTER 6

THE BREEZE WAS FRESHENING, and as the little boat skimmed up the river, Sally, taking over the helm, had hard work to hold the straining main-sheet. The full force of the tide was with them, too, and they raced onwards, revelling in the swiftness of their progress, and the glorious sense of power that comes to those who have harnessed the wind to do their bidding.

It was not long before a further bend in the river brought them in sight of Barnes Bridge. The few feet of clearance looked from that distance menacingly low. Sally looked up doubtfully at the tall gaff that traced a line against the sky above their heads.

'I think we shall have to lower the sail, Captain,' she said, 'or we'll hit the bridge.'

'Right, Mister,' agreed Robert. 'Plenty of time when we get there.'

'Aye, aye, sir. Would you like to take over now? My arm's getting a bit tired, and it'll be a tricky business getting under, I should think.'

'O.K.,' said Robert, changing seats warily. 'We'll sail straight for it, then, just as we look like hitting it, Sally, lower the gaff, and we should have enough way on to carry us through with the tide helping.'

As Robert took the tiller the Able Seamen reported: 'Tug coming up astern, sir.'

A hasty glance showed the skipper a black-looking vessel overtaking them at speed. Two peremptory hoots from her whistle indicated that she wished to pass them on the port hand, but Robert, well aware that steam gives way to sail, and not to be denied his right by any merchantman, continued to steer a straight and beautiful course for the middle arch of the bridge. What was his indignation, then, when renewed tootings, and a squeak of alarm from Jane, told him that the tug also was clinging to her purpose. Still, another quick glance over his shoulder assured him that he could just do it.

'Oh, Robert,' breathed Jane. 'Look out!'

'Shut up,' he said crisply. 'Stand by to lower the gaff, Sally.'

Sally leapt to the halyards, and as soon as Robert

cried: 'Lower away,' took the main halyard off its cleat. The wretched thing, released without due caution, slipped from her hand, and down came the mainsail with such suddenness that it enveloped the skipper and completely obscured his view of both steamer and bridge. To Robert, however, the crowning urgency of saving their beautiful sail from a wetting dominated all else. With a yell of: 'Gather her in, you asses!' he clasped as much of the bellying canvas as he could with his one free arm, incidentally putting the tiller hard over with the other. The *Esmeralda* swung broadside on to the tide, there was a roar of fury from the tug, and with a hasty reversal of her engines she swung round in a semi-circle. Simultaneously came a frantic yell from Mickie:

'Look out! The bridge!'

For one awful second that seemed ages long, the four children sat transfixed, while the large black pile of the bridge seemed to sweep down upon them. The wash of the tug had caught them now; under the dark shadow of the bridge the waves seemed vast and destructive, and the *Esmeralda* was in imminent danger of being hurled against the massive stone piers.

Nobody knew quite how Robert did it. Somehow between one wave and another he snatched up the rope fender, and with a yell of: 'Sit down! Sit down!' he flung it over the side of the boat. With a horrible jar, and an agonised groan of protest, her timbers ground

and flattened the rope against that terrifying pillar of iron and stone.

Meantime, Sally had grabbed an oar, and standing with legs firmly planted on the weather side of the boat, shoved with all her might against the bridge. The boat heeled over perilously with the weight of Robert and the boom, not to mention Mickie, who had leapt to the foredeck and there sat with feet outstretched to protect the bows.

'Trim her! Sit her out, Jane!' shouted Robert frantically, and as Jane flung herself on the gunwale he reached for the tiller and pulled it hard over. A swirling eddy caught the bow of *Esmeralda*. With a last awful creak of crushed rope and straining timber she swung around and slid under the bridge, and out into the open water beyond.

For a long moment nobody spoke. They all sat looking at one another and feeling slightly sick.

'Cripes,' said Mickie at last. 'That was a near one.'

Inadequate as they felt this remark to be, further comment was drowned by the furious hootings of the cause of all the trouble – a large black tug, labelled 'GERTIE MAY' in dingy letters, which now came snorting angrily through the bridge in their wake. Language unprintable came from the mouth of her skipper, as he shook his fist at them, and over her bow leaned a black-browed, grimy urchin of about Robert's age.

‘Garn, you lousy landlubbers!’ he yelled. ‘Why don’t you stick to your prams?’

‘Why doesn’t your old man learn to steer?’ shrieked Mickie promptly, which brilliant sally produced a further outburst of fury from the skipper of the *Gertie May*.

‘I’ll have the law on yer!’ he yelled.

‘Law my eye!’ screamed Mickie. ‘You don’t even know the first law of navigation, they’ll put you in jug for being out of control in a public highway.’

By this time the tug was almost out of hailing distance, but the raucous voice of the boy came clearly over the water:

‘You wait! You’ll get what’s comin’ to yer if yer don’t take your bag of tricks back on the Round Pond!’

‘ALL RIGHT!’ bellowed Mickie, fairly dancing with passion upon the foredeck.

‘Now then, now then, what’s all this?’ came a soft and friendly voice from astern.

The four children turned round, startled, for they had no idea there were any spectators about. Leaning placidly on his oars was a large and stalwart river policeman, in a battered dinghy, so small that it seemed totally unfitted to bear his weight.

Wide blue eyes beamed at them from a ruddy, weather-tanned face, and his mouth was curved in a friendly grin.

‘What’s all this?’ he repeated, as they stared at him. ‘Trying to sink the *Gertie May*?’

'I should think not!' exclaimed Robert indignantly. 'She was trying to sink us, more like, coming up behind us like a - like a —'

'I know, I saw it all,' said the policeman. Something in the deep burr of his voice was strangely familiar.

'Why, you must be from Devon!' cried Sally suddenly. He turned and beamed at her.

'Yes, miss, I am, but how come you knew?'

'Oh, we know Devon pretty well. What part do you come from?'

'Portlemouth.'

'PORTLEMOUTH! But that's just over the water from Salcombe!' cried Robert.

'So it be. Do you know Salcombe, then?'

'Do we know Salcombe?' they cried in derision, and Jane explained:

'We always spend our holidays there, you see.'

'Well now, fancy that,' said the policeman. 'Maybe then you know old James Jarvis?'

'Good Lord, yes,' exclaimed Robert. 'Why, old James taught us to sail, and young James takes us lobster-potting.'

'Well now,' said the policeman again. 'Isn't the world small! Why, he's my uncle, old James Jarvis is.'

'Why then - ' light dawned upon the Lorrimers - 'you must be Jim Jarvis, the one that went to London to be a policeman!'

'So I am, only I'm a river policeman, which isn't the same at all. Now wait a moment —' deep thought

puckered his honest, open face, and then he exclaimed: 'I've got it, knew it all along, you must be the young Lorrimers! Well, well, well!'

No meeting between fellow-explorers in uncharted jungle could have appeared more remarkable than this encounter with a Devon man in the wilds of London. It was as if a piece of that magic county with its rocks and sands and ever-sounding sea, had appeared suddenly like a mirage on the face of the London River.

Their first enthusiasm was cut short by the immediate necessities of their position. They had momentarily forgotten their narrow escape, and the fact that they were drifting rapidly up-stream. At this point, however, Mickie happened to glance over his shoulder.

'I say,' he exclaimed. 'Look out! There's a lot of boats moored here, and we shall be into them in a second.'

'Look here,' said Jim. 'Get your jib down, give me your painter and I'll tow you into the shore; then you can beach your boat and get yourselves ship-shape and ready for sea again.'

'Oh, yes,' said Jane suddenly. 'And there's our lunch.'

'Lunch?' echoed Jim. 'You're a bit late, aren't you? It's gone half-past two.'

'Goodness!' The children were considerably impressed. They could not remember ever before forgetting a meal.

'Look,' said Sally politely, as Jim made fast the

painter with a couple of skilful hitches, 'if we beach the *Esmeralda* there, and eat our lunch, wouldn't you stay and have it with us? There's quite enough,' and she indicated the bulging basket of good things that Heidi had packed for them that morning.

'Well,' Jim grinned broadly, 'I've really had my dinner, in a manner of speaking, but seeing as how as it's getting along for tea-time and I've got an hour before coming on duty at the station there, I dare say I might find room for a crumb or so.'

Ten minutes later they were seated on a grassy bank sharing out cold chicken, hard-boiled eggs, crisp rolls and large slabs of chocolate cake so rich and sumptuous that Jim rolled his eyes in wonder.

A brief inspection had assured them that their precious vessel was no the worse for her adventure. Now, as they sat and inunched in thoughtful silence, anger welled up in them again at the thought of the *Gertie May*, who had so heartily brought them to disaster.

'Ah,' said Jim judicially, after listening for a few minutes to their full-mouthed but bitter recriminations. 'He's a tough customer. the skipper of the *Gertie May*. Not but what you should have got clear through that bridge in spite of her. If you'd just dipped your gaff and kept your course you'd have been all right, and she'd have been bound to slow up.'

Sally went rather red, and stammered: 'I know, it was me, the sail, I mean.'

‘Rot,’ said Robert. ‘I was at the helm —

Jim interrupted and his thick rich voice soothed their ruffling spirits. ‘It’s no good crying over spilt milk, and she certainly seryed you a dirty trick coming up on you like that. But then that’s Ben Skinner all over. He’s a proper bully. We know him wvell on the river, and I can tell you we don’t like him — nor that young varmint of his, neither, for that matter. He’s a terror, he is, young Squinty Skinner.’

‘Well I wish you’d jolly well jug them,’ said Robert viciously.

‘Can’t you, though?’ exclaimed Mickie. ‘I think they ought to be had up for dangerous driving.’

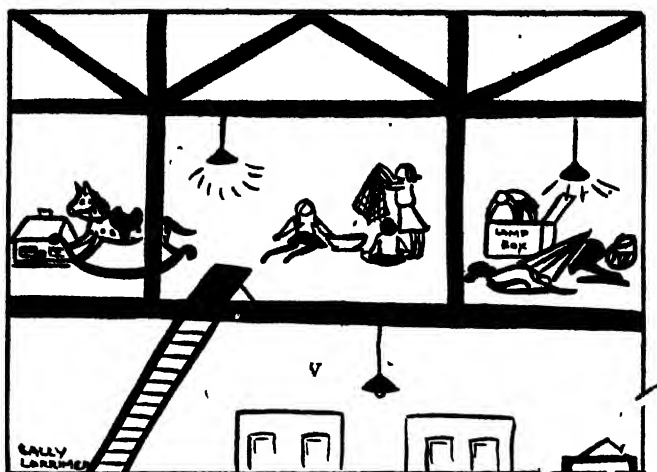
‘And for insulting behaviour,’ added Jane, in whose breast the mention of prams still rankled.

‘Ah,’ said Jim, ‘you can’t take ’em up for things like that, more’s the pity, but give ’em time and I don’t doubt they’ll be getting themselves into a bit of trouble one day.’

All too soon Jim’s hour was up, but not before their acquaintance had ripened into real friendship. For a full half-hour, after the last crumb had been consumed and the last scrap of paper buried, the children sat absorbed, even *Esmeralda* forgotten, whilst in his soft Devon accent, Jim told them tale after tale of the London River — tales of ships and docks, bridges and tideways, strange vessels and stranger o’ews.

‘And remember,’ were his final words of warning, ‘don’t play no tricks with the London River. You

might go a long way before you'd find tides as swift and currents as tricky and winds as flukey, and old Father Thames doesn't give away no more chances than he can help. But keep your heads and you'll be all right – and if you take my advice, keep clear of the *Gertie May*.'



CHAPTER 7

A STEADY, familiar drip, drip, drip roused the children from sleep the next morning. Sitting up in their various beds they gazed with dismay at the rain that streamed from a sodden sky, beating in rude derision on the window-panes, and even splashing on to their bedroom floors. Nor was there so much as a vestige of wind to encourage them to defy the elements. No, sailing for that day was definitely off.

It was thus a depressed and gloomy party that eventually gathered in the kitchen for breakfast. Heidi's crisp hot toast and buttered eggs did something to relieve the general gloom, and she was just marshalling

her forces for the washing-up, when a sudden ring at the front door startled them all.

'Ach,' cried Heidl, peering out of the window. 'Ach, so! It is the telegraph boy. Run, kinder, run, maybe he brings news of the Herr Papa.'

With one accord they raced up the stairs and flung open the door.

'Cable,' began the boy, only to have it snatched from his grasp by four eager hands. It seemed for a moment that the yellow envelope would be torn in pieces, as they all tugged frantically in different directions, but at last Robert managed to pull it free. He tore it open with strangely clumsy fingers, and they all craned over his shoulder to read.

DADDY BETTER. DONT WORRY. ARE YOU ALL RIGHT.
MUMMY.

What people do in moments of emotion is a purely personal matter. Suffice it to say that Mickie let out a whoop like a steam siren, Jane danced up and down in a silent ecstasy, and Robert beat the astonished telegraph boy so hard on the back that he nearly fell down the front-door steps. Sally, who had gone as white as a sheet, said: 'Look out, I'm going to be sick,' and bolted into the house.

By the time their equilibrium was somewhat restored, the boy had also recovered sufficient breath to inform them in feeble tones that there was a reply paid, whereupon a repentant Robert invited him in for a

cup of Heidl's famous hot chocolate, while a suitable message was composed. Mollified by this handsome amend, he was finally despatched with the following rather cryptic reply:

HOORAY HOORAY BEST LOVE TO DADDY. YES.

LORRIMER.

This, they considered, expressed their feelings as well as a cable could be expected to do, at the same time giving a perfectly adequate reply to their mother's anxious question!

It was now nearly ten o'clock, and once again arose the pressing question: 'What shall we do?' This, however, was not the sort of problem to worry Heidl.

'First,' she said, 'we will the house clean make, and then - the lunch!' She paused dramatically, smacking her lips. 'He shall be a FEAST, yes?'

'Ooh, yes, Heidl, what shall it be?'

'So, what shall it be? Perhaps the Schnitzel Holstein?'

'Whatever is that?'

'That is a beautiful piece of thin veal, fried, and on top a fried egg, and on top of that again an anchovy, and on top of that again a caper. Then we will have the Apfel Strudel because he is such fun to make, and with it whipped cream.'

A chorus of delighted greeted these rapturous suggestions, and Heidl beamed.

'Then for this we must make purchases. Mickie dusts

not gut, he is too, how you call it? Slopdish? Therefore he should mit his umbrella the shopping do. At eleven he will be back, the house too will be clean, and there shall be a great cooking, we will pull the pastry for the Apfel Strudel all over the kitchen until it is as fine as tissue-paper.'

Nobody had much fault to find with this arrangement, least of all Mickie, who, as he paddled happily off in his oilskins and sea-boots, privately resolved to dust even less 'gut' next time. By the time he returned, laden with parcels, the beds were made and the house shone with cleanliness.

'Got the stuff, Mike?' enquired Robert, switching off the Hoover, with which he had been galloping up and down the hall.

'You bet,' said Mickie. 'And something else, too, and he slapped his pocket with elaborate mystery.

'What is it? Can I see?' shrieked Jane, sliding rapidly down the banisters.

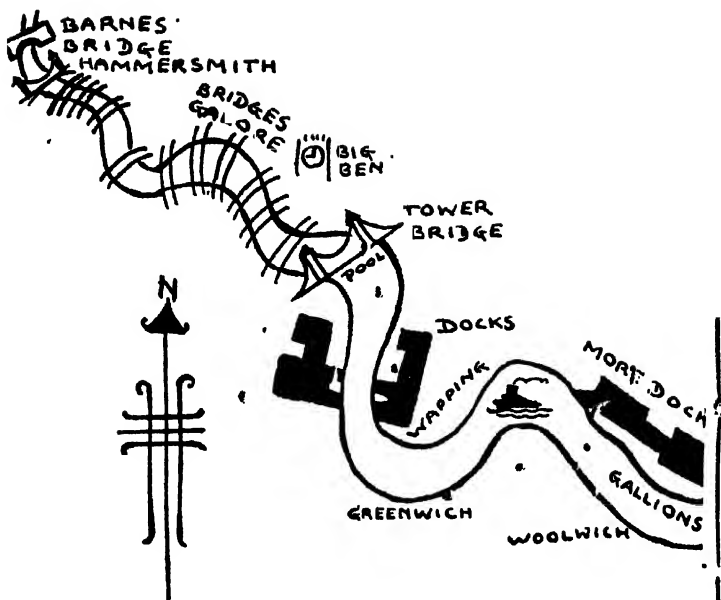
'Come down to the kitchen and I'll show you.'

Dumping his parcels on the kitchen table, he put his hand to his pocket.

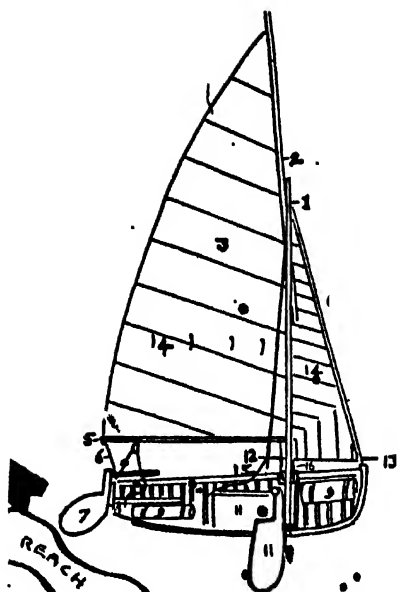
'First of all you can 'll hand over sixpence. It cost two bob.'

'Tripe, you little shark,' said Robert firmly. 'How do we know it's worth sixpence? You jolly well show it us first.'

With some reluctance Mickie produced a small flat package and flung it on the table.



THE ' LONDON RIVER
AND I E'S MERALDA



- 1 MAST
- 2 GAFF
- 3 MAINSAIL
- 4 REEF-POINTS,
- 5 BOOM
- 6 MAIN SHEET
- 7 RUDDER
- 8 THWART
- 9 BUOYANCY TANKS
- 10 RIBS
- 11 CENTRE PLATE
- 12 SHROUDS
- 13 FORE STAY
- 14 FORE SAIL
- 15 FORESAIL SHEETS
- 16 HALYARDS



'Well,' said Jane in aggrieved tones, 'it's only an old map.' But Robert was already unfolding it excitedly.

'I say, good work, Mike!' he exclaimed eagerly. 'It's a map of the London River. Out of the way, you chaps,' and elbowing a bag of flour off the table with one arm and Jane with the other, he spread out the map and leaned over it with intent and fascinated gaze.

It was indeed a thing of fascination. Over fold after fold of the paper, through a myriad of straight-lined mundane-looking streets, in graceful blue curves wound the London River. Incredible seemed the turns and twists it took, unimaginable the length of it. And when they considered the tiny thread that symbolised the broad waters of Hammersmith, they gazed in awe upon the mighty breadth of the waters that gave outlet to the sea.

'Look,' said Jane. 'That writing there - it's all got names, G - A - L, Gallion's Reach. Ooh!'

'Lower Hope,' said Robert. 'That's better still.'

'Long Reach,' chanted Mickie, like a Greek Chorus. 'And S - E -'

'Sea Reach - SEA REACH.' Sally clasped a dish-cloth in ecstasy. 'Think of it, all that water - all that way down the river - mile after mile of it - OUR river - and then the sea, really and truly the sea!'

'Oh!' cried Jane and Mickie simultaneously. 'We must go there! We must!'

'Yes,' breathed Sally. 'The length of the London River, and we shall sail down in *Esmeralda*.'

Breathing rather heavily, chin cupped in his hands, Robert continued to pore over the map.

'I don't see why we shouldn't,' he said at last. 'It's an awful long way, of course, but —'

'Well, anyway,' interrupted Mickie shrilly, 'what's to stop us trying? I mean we could start out and see where we got to.'

'That's right,' agreed Robert. 'Taking the tide at the right moment would help a lot.'

'All day we could go,' cried Jane. 'Starting at dawn.'

'Breakfast on board,' from Sally, and Mickie chimed in:

'And lunch and tea and dinner.'

'Now look,' said Robert, raising his head at last, 'shut up a minute, will you, and let's think about it seriously. We'd have to do it properly, same as a real voyage of discovery. We must plan it all out, every detail, arrange the provisioning and work out the tides, because we must find a day with an early tide down.'

'Oh, let's go to-morrow!' exclaimed Jane.

'Don't be an owl, Jane,' said Robert. 'We can't just go off when we feel like it. We've got to wait for the wind and tide — *and* the right weather,' he added ominously, glancing at the rain that still streamed down the window-pane.

Then followed a hectic discussion as to the complexities of the London tideway, into which the voice of Heidl broke at last.

‘And the dinner, he is then to cook himself?’

They stared guiltily, and Robert shook his head, as one aroused from sleep. They had forgotten the existence of Heidl – food – Victoria Road. In their minds they were speeding far down the river to the distant sea, with the white sail of the *Esmeralda* spread against a cloudless sky, and her curved bow dancing over the waves.

‘Oh, gosh!’ said Robert. ‘I’m sorry, Heidl, we quite forgot.’

‘So!’ Heidl beamed upon them. ‘It is gut that I make not also the sailing, nicht wahr? Dream your dreams, kinder, but see that you have always your Heidl by, who forgets not the frying-pan.’

‘Oh, Heidl,’ cried Sally remorsefully, ‘what lazy beasts we are, and after you’d planned that lovely lunch for us, too. Come on, everybody, we’re jolly well going to get to work now.’

With true repentant zeal they rolled up their sleeves and set to, but the magic had worked and the spell of the London River was still upon them. The veal sizzling in the frying-pan sang to Sally as the hiss of water under a hard-driven keel, Jane whipped the cream to a rich sea-foam, and Robert and Mickie, peeling apples, sought omens of good weather as they cast the peel behind them.

It would have needed more, however, than a little sea-magic to dull the famous Lorrimer appetites. Indeed, the pride of having created it themselves made

lunch taste twice as good as usual, and they were very well cleaned plates that were finally washed up amid much laughter and chattering and perilous clashing of china.

The afternoon before them, and no signs of a break in the dreary sheets of rain, the children retired to Robert and Mickie's bedroom, as being the largest room available, and settled down on the floor with their map.

'I think we ought to start to-morrow,' announced Mickie. 'We could easily get down to the river by six – or perhaps five would be better – give us time to get everything ready. I could wake you all about four. I'm often awake then.'

'MICKIE!!'

'Well, I was once, anyway, that time I had tooth-ache.'

'Anyway,' interrupted Robert with decision, 'we're not going to-morrow. It's too jolly early for one thing, and for another we've got to get the boat and all the provisions and things ready first. That's right, isn't it, Sally?'

'Yes, rather,' said the mate loyally. 'Besides, we haven't really established our camp yet on the island. We ought to have a proper base to start from.'

This opened a new vista of thought, and the map was momentarily set aside whilst they started compiling a vast list of all the things they considered necessary to establish an outpost of civilisation on Chiswick

Eyot. It was Jane who suddenly had the brain-wave, and jumping in the air cried: 'The attic!'

They stared at her in amazement, and Mickie said: 'What's bitten old Pug-face?' But Sally who was familiar with the workings of her sister's mind, said: 'Of course, the attic - the camping-box!'

Then all four were on their feet and racing through the door, and up the stairs to the top of the house. Like most London attics this fascinating place had no direct access to the rest of the house. A wonderful ladder like a fire-escape on a fire-engine came slowly down from the ceiling when certain mechanism was put into operation. Robert fitted the crank handle, and to a rousing shout of 'Blow the Man Down,' he and Mickie heaved and pulled until the ladder rested on the floor.

'Up aloft and furl the top-sails!' cried Sally, leading the way up the vertical ladder and thrusting the trap-door open impatiently. Jane followed more slowly. She really didn't like this very much and felt considerably relieved when Sally caught hold of her arm at the top and yanked her to safety. The boys followed, nimble as a couple of monkeys.

There are few places as fascinating as a family attic. So many dear discarded things lie harboured there, that a visit is like a pilgrimage back into the past. To-day, however, the Lorrimers were not to be deflected from their purpose, and for once Jane did not linger to caress Nobby, the old, battered rocking-horse, nor Sally pause to delve in the fancy-dress box.

The camp-box was at all times a favourite. It held record of so many happy holidays – rucksacks Mummy and Daddy had carried on their climbing tours in the Alps, mosquito-nets they had slept under in Africa, the Primus stove and Tommy cooker over which such lovely meals had been concocted for family picnics. All these and more were taken out and bundled on to the floor that a proper selection might be made, and from the general conversation one thing soon became apparent, though nobody had actually mooted the idea, and that was that the Lorrimers intended camping on the banks of the river before so very long.

‘Do you think Mummy and Daddy’d mind?’ asked the Family Conscience tentatively.

‘Course not!’ said Mickie. ‘Didn’t they let us sleep out all last summer, even when it rained!’

‘What about the Primus, then?’ continued Jane. ‘Do you think we really ought to take that? Daddy never let us touch it.’

‘Pooh, that was last year,’ said Robert. ‘He wouldn’t mind now. Only mind, nobody but me’s going to work it. I’m fourteen now and we’ve studied internal combustion in the I. h. at school.’

‘Is that how a Primus works?’ asked Sally. ‘I thought —’

Robert broke in hastily: ‘Well, not exactly, but it all helps.’

Jane laid the Primus reverently aside. It was one of the few things during the whole of their childhood

that had come under the heading: 'Don't Touch,' and she regarded it as a kind of monstrous dragon, for once when Mickie, ever impatient at restraint, had put a match to it, it had seen fit to vent its displeasure by spurting great jets of flame from its mouth. However, if Robert knew all about internal combustion he probably understood how to control this monster.

Robert sat quietly thinking for a while, whilst the others continued to ferret feverishly, then from the deflated Li-Lo on which he was sitting he spoke, in the kind of voice that requires to be listened to.

'I've been thinking. It's not going to be easy establishing a camp on an island that is quite unprotected from enemy invasion, and of course we can't always leave it guarded, so anything we leave there we've got to hide in such a secret place that no one will ever find it. We shan't be able to leave an awful amount, but cooking things and food and that. It seems to me the best way would be to get some big biscuit-tins and pack our stuff in them, then dig a pit under some bushes to take them. Then we must devise camouflaged tops to the pits that can be taken off by us but not seen by anybody else. So we mustn't get carried away and take a lot of unnecessary stuff.' He said this last pointedly as Jane, with infinite care, fitted together a collapsible bath. 'When we wash, we wash in good old Father Thames. So let's take a pull and get down to it.'

Finally they set aside four sleeping-bags, two ground-sheets, two small tents that Sally had given the twins

last birthday from the Scout Shop, the Primus, a frying-pan, a kettle, a saucepan, four enamel plates and mugs and an assortment of exceedingly bent and dim cutlery, that was kept specially for picnics. This they managed to pack into Major Lorrimier's large rucksack, leaving the other rucksack for the transport of foodstuffs.

Well satisfied with the afternoon's work they returned to Robert's bedroom and the map. Now, more than ever, they felt that even the farthest stretch of the river was not out of reach, and the boys chanted in chorus:

'Maplin Sands, Canvey Island, Sheppey, Havengore Creek - THE NORE.'

'Oh! Oh! Oh!' cried Sally. 'We'll go to there all.'

'We'll have to keep a what's-it's-name,' suggested Jane helpfully. 'A diary thing - you know.'

'A log, you mean,' said Mickie.

'Yes, that's it, a log of the voyage.'

'Right you are, Pug,' said Robert. 'So we should. We ought to keep one all the time really. They always do at sea.'

Pink with pleasure at the success of her suggestion, Jane scrambled to her feet.

'I know! I've got a book that would do. It's my composition-book, and I've only used one page. I can get a new one next term.'

'I tell you what,' said Sally slowly. 'If we really do

it properly, like a sort of diary, I mean, it could be for Mummy and Daddy when they get back.'

'Oh, YES!' Universal approval greeted this idea, and Jane rushed happily off to get her book. She returned with two.

'Look, I found this brand-new nature-book too. It's got drawing pages in as well, and I thought Sally could do drawings in it. Then it would be like a real book, and Mummy and Daddy could see what it was all like.'

'So you could, Sally! Will you have a shot?' asked Robert eagerly.

'Well, I could try. It would be fun.'

'I'll do some drawings, too, if you like,' offered Mickie nonchalantly; but Mickie's artistic style was sufficiently a byword in the family for this offer to be received with a firm and universal negative. This lack of appreciation, which might have been dashing to a lesser artist, left him as thruffled as adverse criticism always did, and he was soon loud in helpful hints as to exactly how the log-book should be kept.

Sally, in the meantime, was already absorbed in experimental drawings. She sketched in first several rapid portraits of each of them, which Jane regarded critically.

'Couldn't you make some of us looking the other way?' she pointedly enquired. 'Then my parting would show.'

*Sally's log-book drawings are printed as chapter-headings in this book.

'Oh, Jane, do you really mind?' asked the harassed artist. 'It's so much easier to draw people this way round.'

'Well,' said Jane doggedly, 'I do think it would make a *change*, you know.' So Sally, sighing in a resigned sort of way, took another sheet of paper and drew them all facing to the right instead of to the left. 'But,' as she took care to explain, 'if you all look a little queer, you mustn't blame me.'



CHAPTER 8

THOUGH THE RAIN HAD CEASED by the following morning, there was a stormy look about the day, and a high gusty wind chased threatening clouds across the sky. Nothing short of the deluge of yesterday, however, could keep the children from their boat. The optimistic skipper went so far as to announce at breakfast that they ought to be ready to leave for the river at 9.30, but it turned out to be one of those days when everything goes wrong.

Mickie, as usual, was at the root of most of the trouble. He began the morning by tweaking off Sally's favourite scarlet hair-ribbon, and threatening to drop it into the coffee-pot 'to make it a more sensible

colour.' When its owner, refusing to be drawn, replied nonchalantly that he could do as he pleased, he was obliged to carry out his threat, and a free fight ensued, which it took the combined forces of Heidi and Robert to quell.

This little dispute settled, the author of it wandered off to the scullery, ostensibly to scrub the frying-pan. The others finished their breakfast peacefully and soon forgot the disturbance. A little later, therefore, when they carried the cups and plates out to the sink they were horrified to find that the author of it had inscribed his name in boot-blackening all over the newly scrubbed scullery floor. This did little to lessen the family tension.

Even the good-natured Heidi was exasperated, and by way of retribution despatched Mickie upstairs to find, bring down, and clean, all the family shoes. Why this should have led him to explore Jane's desk was not clear, but he presently returned to the kitchen grinning from ear to ear. He was flourishing a closely scribbled sheet of paper, at sight of which Jane gave a shriek of mingled alarm and fury.

'That's *mine*! Give 't to me! You *beast*, you've been in my private desk!'

Mickie stepped nimbly aside as she sprang at him.

'I say!' he cried, dodging round the table. 'Just listen to the Poet Laureate's latest:

'The London River winds on and on
With here a duck and there a swan.
Oh I often wonder how far you go,
But I do not suppose I shall ever know.'

He read this out in tones so irresistibly funny, that all but the authoress laughed until the tears ran down their cheeks. It was not indeed until poor Jane, taking advantage of a helpless paroxysm of mirth, snatched her insulted epic from Mickie's grasp and flung it into the fire, that they realised how deeply they had hurt her feelings.

'You mean, beastly *beasts*!' she cried. 'How dare you read my private things! You'll be sorry for this one day, you just see if you aren't!' and bursting into tears she dashed out of the room and locked herself into the bathroom.

A startled silence settled on the kitchen, and for once in his life Mickie both felt and looked acutely uncomfortable. Deep down inside him his devotion to Jane had never changed, but he was dimly aware that in his strivings after manliness he had not been as nice to her these holidays as he might have been.

'I say, it was rather beastly of us,' said Sally remorsefully.

'She always was a bit queer about her poems,' said Robert.

'Silly rot,' muttered Mickie, without conviction.

At this moment the clock struck with piercing notes.

and immediately all concerns but one fled from the skipper's mind.

'O Lor'!' he cried in anguish. 'Eleven o'clock already. Somebody get her out for the love of mike, or we shall NEVER get to the river.'

'Oh, all right,' said Mickie. 'I'll have a shot.'

Flat on the bathroom floor, shaken with sobs, Jane was in deepest anguish. Nobody could ever know how she felt about the river – how already it had taken a hold on her life – nobody could realise how hard she had tried to put something of her feelings into verse – and now they had all laughed at it, and spoilt it for ever, and she had cried in front of them all, and Mickie wasn't her Mickie any more! And worst of all she had locked herself in here, and how was she ever, without mortal wound to her pride, to get herself out again in time to go to Hampersmith?

At all events, decided Jane, biting the bath-mat, this settled things with Mickie. If he could do without her, she could do without him. Except for things like 'Pass me the butter,' or 'Where is Sally?' she would never, never speak to him again.

At this moment she heard a curious scrabbling noise. She looked up in time to see an enormous bright red handkerchief, covered with yellow sea-horses, working its way slowly under the door. She stared at it a moment through swimming eyes, before realising that she knew it well. Of course, it was one of Mickie's most cherished possessions, given to him by James's

Harry at Salcombe. She eyed it in suspicious silence, but before she had had time to formulate a plan of action, it was followed by a grubby piece of paper, inscribed with the words:

THIS IS FOR YOU

Twenty minutes later, a blissful procession left the house. Robert, on whom excitement always had a rather sobering effect, swung the picnic basket and marched as one who goes to a great destiny. Sally, varying her step with an occasional hop, kept pace with him. And far ahead pranced Mickie and Jane, beaming, chattering, all barriers down.

Hasten as they might, however, it was nearly twelve o'clock when they reached the green gate. Falling over one another in their impatience, the twins tumbled up the steps, paused to make sure that the beloved vessel was really and truly there; and with a cry of dismay stiffened where they stood.

'Oh! LOOK!'

The picnic basket dropped with a crash, as Robert and Sally rushed after them up the steps. With bulging eyes they followed the direction of Mickie's pointing finger, and in their turn a cry of horror was rent from their lips.

High and dry on the shingle lay the good ship *Esmeralda*, her shining new paint coated thick with

mud, and her beautiful interior filled with stones, dust, rubbish and filth of every sort. Nor had they far to seek for the perpetrators of this hideous crime. Close beside the stricken vessel danced and gesticulated four filthy urchins, pausing every now and then to hurl yet more filth at the *Esmeralda*.

For one second the Lorrimers stood petrified with horror. Then, with a united scream of fury, they leapt over the gate and hurtled down the gang-plank. Startled by this sudden onrush the despoilers spun round. Two of them made as if to run, but a shout from one who was evidently the ring-leader, gave them pause.

‘Strike me! It it ain’t them four cissies!’

Through a blinding mist of rage, Robert recognised the lank, unsavoury form of ‘Squinty’ Skinner, son of the captain of the *Gertie May*.

‘You – YOU –’ Fury choked the words in his throat.

‘You – YOU –’ mimicked the boy in shrill offensive tones. ‘What’s the matter, duckie? Lorst yer little temper?’

‘You lousy little guttersnipe,’ said Robert thickly. ‘You can jolly well clean every bit of that muck out of our boat.’

‘Ho, with pleasure, h’I’m sure,’ minced the loathsome Squinty. ‘Halbert, be so good as to bring me me duster.’

This striking sarcasm produced howls of laughter

from his friends, and cries of: 'Go on, Squinty, you dust 'is Lordship!'

'It'd take a jolly sight more than dusting to get you clean!' burst suddenly from Mickie.

Robert's face was white with the effort he was making at self-control. Mounting anger was making him dizzy and almost sick, and his tight-clenched fists were tingling for the nose of 'Squinty' Skinner, but he knew that while he was in charge of his sisters he had no business to land himself in a fight if he could help it.

'For the last time,' he said, and his voice shook, 'are you going to clean up our boat?'

'Sure we are,' cried Squinty, and bending, snatched a banana-skin from the debris they had piled into the *Esmeralda*, and flung it at Robert. Unfortunately – or fortunately, whichever way you look at it – his aim was not good. Instead of going where it was meant, the banana-skin hit Jane straight in the face.

Then Robert saw red. Without a word of warning he flung himself on Squinty, who had barely time to shriek to his companions for help before Robert's left caught him straight and full on the nose. Bellowing with pain, he hit out wildly, and simultaneously the other three boys hurled themselves into the fray. This was enough for Mickie, who, forgetting all the science he had learnt in the school gym, went for them with flailing fists and butting head.

The enemy, however, had badly miscalculated the number of their opponents. In thinking they had only

two to deal with, they had reckoned without the Lorrimer girls, who, making up in spirit what they lacked in technique, started a savage guerilla warfare of their own. Sally seized a loose plank from the littered foreshore and attacked the enemy from the rear, belabouring them with all her force whenever occasion offered, and eliciting howls of anguish. Meanwhile, Jane, having delivered a series of ineffectual kicks, one of which caught Robert smartly on the ankle, suddenly remembered something of what Mickie had told her of Rugger tactics. She backed away about ten yards, gathered herself together, and flung herself recklessly on the nearest pair of enemy legs.

It was Squinty who got the full force of the impact. Her arms closed round his bony knees and brought him crashing to the ground, while the right hook that Robert was even then directing at his chin whistled over his head and caught one of his supporters a crack on the side of the head. Simultaneously, Mickie, finding his arms just too short to make their mark on his opponent's face, winded him completely by a savage butt in the stomach. Whereupon, dismayed at the downfall of his fellows, the fourth took to his heels and fled.

At this moment a gruff shout from the gang-plank startled them all.

'Nah then! What's going on 'ere?'

In a flash Squinty and his satellites were on their feet and racing down the foreshore. Flushed with victory,

the children let them go, but as Mr. Larch came up they surrounded him with indignant clamour.

'Look what they've done to our boat!'

'Her lovely paint all MUD!'

'After you'd got her so nice.'

'Now, now,' said Mr. Larch, 'don't take on so. The young varminths!' He broke off to shake his fist viciously at their vanishing forms. 'They must 'ave waited till they see me leave the yard for me morning pint. I'll larn 'em.'

'I say,' said Robert suddenly; 'jolly fine tackle you did on Squinty, Jane. Just saved the day.'

Jane flushed with pleasure, and dabbed rather ostentatiously at a badly grazed knee. This suggested a general count of casualties, which, however, proved to be fewer than might have been expected. Robert's lip was split and swelling finely, and his knuckles had suffered considerably from contact with Squinty's face. Mickie's left eye was already black and blue and his cheek slightly grazed, whilst Sally, to her acute humiliation, had no wounds to show.

They mustered two cleanish handkerchiefs among them, and had included (thanks to their mother's stern teaching) an iodine pen in the ship's stores, so first-aid treatment was administered all round by the first mate. After this, feeling somewhat battered, they ate their lunch in Mr. Larch's shed, before turning their attention to their despoiled and insulted vessel.

Working hard, it took them a good two hours to

get the *Esmeralda* clean again and ready for sea. The only glimmer of satisfaction to be had from this weary task was introduced by Mickie, who pointed out that it must have taken Squinty and his cronies about as long to reduce her to such a state of filth.

While they worked Mr. Larch leant over the side of a barge and watched them, smoking an ancient and stinking pipe.

'Ah,' he said, spitting neatly into the river, 'a proper terror 'e is, that Squinty. Sly? - I ne'er seen the like. 'E'd steal the coat off yer back and then arsk yer to sew the buttons on for 'im. Not to be wondered at, neither, it ain't, not with a dad like 'is. Proper son of 'is father, 'e is.'

'We should know,' said Robert bitterly. 'They did their best to run us down the other day - and now *this*,' and he waved his hand at the desecrated *Esmeralda*.

'Ah,' observed Mr. Larch, 'better watch out, son, and not get acrost them two. 'E's as full of spite as a egg is full o' meat, that Squinty. Sounds as if you've got 'is goat proper now, and 'e won't let you forget it.'

'All right!' exclaimed Mickie. 'The fight's on them. What do you say, chaps? We can take them on and more.'

'Oh, gosh yes!' shouted the others, and Jane added dramatically: 'To the death!'

Mr. Larch chuckled as he moved to help them launch the now spotless *Esmeralda*.

'Up, lads, and at 'em!' he grinned. 'You get one up

on Squinty and nobody'll be more pleased than 'Erbert Larch.'

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

As Robert prepared to shove off, the boat-builder jerked his head warningly at an increasingly sombre sky.

'I shouldn't go far if I was you, mates,' he said. 'There's a bit of flirt blowing up, I reckon.'

'Right you are,' said Robert, 'wise already to river-lore. 'We'll go down-stream a bit, and then we'll have the tide to bring us back.' He gave *Esmeralda* a final shove, and leapt into the stern of her, scattering the water with his long sea-boots.

The little boat heeled over as the wind filled her foresail, like a spirited horse that strains at the curbing rein, striving for its head. Then, as Sally luffed, she shied up into the wind, while Mickie and Jane between them hauled up the mainstay with hoarse seamanlike shouts. For a moment, helpless and undignified, she staggered in the grip of the tide, sweeping sideways up-river, all her canvas clattering in thunderous, mad disorder. Then, as Mickie bent to make fast the halyard, Sally swung the tiller over. Slowly, slowly, her head came round – slowly the frenzy of the sails died. For one second she hovered, stemming the tide, yet making no way against it. Then in one magical movement the wind smoothed the last wrinkle from her sails, the children leapt to the weather gudgeon, bracing their

feet amidships as she heeled hard over, and they were off, racing across the stream.

No sail they had had yet on the London River had touched the glory of that swift career. The wind lashed the spray into their faces as they leaned far out above the water, and Jane, bending back, back, back, felt her plaits brush the surface of the river, and more than once a thin stream poured in over the lee rail. Sally abandoned the main sheet to Robert who clung to it desperately with both hands, keeping the sail taut as a board. It seemed only a second before they were as close in to the Surrey bank as they dared go.

'Lee-O!' shouted Sally, and they went about with exquisite precision, the whole crew working together like clockwork. One more tack took them under Hammersmith Bridge and here the large warehouses suddenly blanketed the wind, so that *Esmeralda* returned to an even keel, almost throwing the unwary crew overboard. A few drops from a sky now black as pitch caused the skipper to shake his head.

'We'd better be getting back,' he said. 'It looks like being a real soaker.'

Mickie took advantage of the lull to claim his turn at the tiller, and as soon as the crew were settled in their new stations, he squared away and ran for the bridge again. As they neared it, a grimy face peered over the parapet.

'Coo-oo, give us a lift, ducks!' came the dulcet tones of Squinty Skinner.

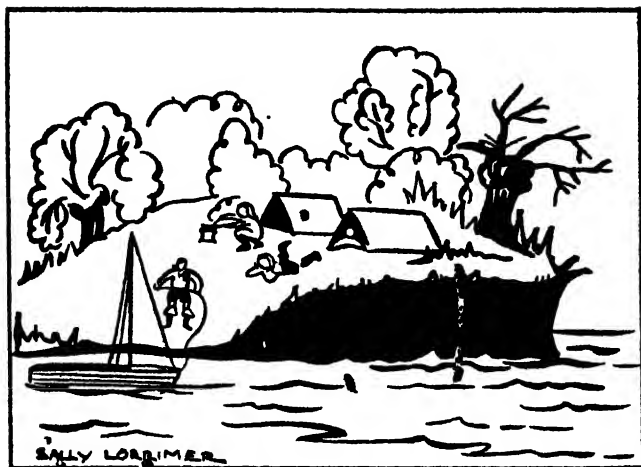
Staggered at this effrontery, Mickie shook his fist at the offending visage.

'You wait, you lily-livered skunk!' he bellowed. 'I'll give you a worse hiding than I did . . .

'MICKIE!' shrieked Jane, and: 'Luff, you fool!' shouted Robert in frantic tones.

But it was too late. Mickie in his frenzy had forgotten the tiller he held, and had let the boat run off the wind. Lifting like a living thing, the boom described one glorious arc in the air, and swung over with a crash that seemed to tear the very heart out of the boat. The four mariners ducked instinctively, but Jane was nearly flung overboard with the force of the jibe, and Mickie narrowly escaped being 'strangled by the main sheet.

For a moment they sat in shattered silence, while the helmsman went pink to the roots of his hair with humiliation and baffled fury. Then, as they swept on under the bridge, a screech of gleeful triumph echoed down to them from above: and leaning yet farther over the parapet, Squinty spat, choicely and disgustingly, fair and square on to the middle of the centre-board case.



CHAPTER 9

MICKIE LAY IN BED, and wondered whether he should wake Robert or not. There were many pleasant ways of doing this – pleasant, that is, for him who did them – but on the other hand it would be most satisfactory to be up and dressed by the time his punctual brother woke. Immediate temptation, however, was finally too strong for him, and creeping from his bed he soaked his sponge in cold water, and flung it with all his force at Robert's upturned face.

It was a most successful manoeuvre. The unfortunate sleeper woke with a gasp, quickly followed by a howl of rage as he leapt from the bed, water dripping down his neck. Mickie gave one piercing shriek of laughter

and fled down the passage to the bathrooms, but here just retribution overtook him. As he rattled at one unyielding door, a happy trill of song came echoing through the other. His sisters, as usual, were in occupation of both the baths.

Escape was cut off, Robert hard on his heels, and he had not even a towel to defend himself. . . .

By the time that Sally poked a cautious nose round the door, her elder brother, seated firmly on Mickie's head, was systematically stuffing the still dripping sponge down the neck of the offender's pyjama jacket.

The mingled sounds of song, and strife, and laughter, told Heidl that it was time to get busy, with her frying-pan, and it was not long before succulent morsels arising from the kitchen put an end to all feud, and brought the children scrambling downstairs.

Breakfast was soon over, and household tasks went with a swing, so that by 9.30 they were ready to put into action the plan they had formulated over toast and marmalade, for the establishment of their home port.

There were many expeditions to the attic to bring down all the things they thought might come in useful on the island, but when they were assembled in the hall, they made such a formidable pile, that Robert took the matter firmly in hand. Even after he had agreed to the suitability of each chosen article there was more than could be taken by bus in one journey.

'Anyway,' said Sally, 'we shan't need the sleeping

and cooking gear to-day, so we can leave that until the Great Expedition sails.'

Finally it was decided to take only the garden spade, two large biscuit-tins looted from Edith's pantry, a number of tinned foods wheedled from Heidi out of the store cupboard, the picnic cutlery, and a gay check table-cloth which Jane insisted upon. The mugs reminded them that something to drink was an essential part of the victualling of the port; and they decided to buy some fizzy lemonade and ginger beer on their way to the river. On top of all this, there was the picnic lunch and tea to carry, so that everyone had both hands full by the time the procession moved off.

'What's up?' grinned the bus-conductor. 'Evacuation of London?'

The Lorrimers grinned back at him, and Robert hustled Jane up the stairs, for she had an embarrassing way of growing confidential when addressed by policemen or bus-conductors.

Mr. Larch was busy this morning, spreading a wondrous sticky mess of tar on the bottom of an old boat. He only acknowledged their arrival with a grunt, so that all the suspicious-looking gear was stowed without comment.

They had felt rather nervous as they approached the yard for fear that *Esmeralda* might have suffered again at the hands of the hooligans, but to-day all was well.

In record time sail was set and the party on their way to establish Port Lorrimer. Robert had worked

out a scheme with pencil and paper in the bus, so very little time was wasted in discussion. He set to work himself to dig two pits, into which the biscuit-tins could be sunk, and a third he then dug to be kept as a reserve store for bottles and other perishable goods. Mickie stayed by to help and advise, and to cart away the surplus earth and throw it into the river, so that no traces would be left of their digging operations. The girls meanwhile wandered over the island picking supple branches that could be woven into covers for the holes. These, disguised with turf, would make them practically undetectable.

The task was more difficult than they had imagined and it was two o'clock before Robert was satisfied with the work, and would allow them to open the picnic basket.

They had finished lunch and were lying on their faces, replete and very content, when Robert suddenly gave a yelp, and a glint of light lit his eyes.

'Gosh!' he cried. 'I believe that's the *Gertie May*, lying moored up there.'

There was no mistaking the blunt ugly bow, and moved by the wash of a passing steamer, her stern swung into view displaying in dirty white lettering her name:

GERTIE MAY

'I'd like to scupper her!' said Mickie between clenched teeth.

'And make Squinty Skinner walk the plank,' continued Sally.

'And hang Ben Skinner from the yard-arm,' came from Jane with surprising vehemence.

'But, honestly,' said Robert, 'I don't think they ought to get off scot-free. I'd like to think of something that would pay them out.'

'Oh, do let's do something!'

'Yes, but what? That's the difficulty. We'd only get into trouble if we really hurt the ship or Squinty. I'd like to do something that would make them look silly - make people laugh at them. Something that'd make them wild.'

'I've got it!' exclaimed Sally. 'Let's get some white-wash or something like that, and paint some sort of message on her sides at dead of night.'

'Oh, Sally, we wouldn't dare,' breathed Jane.

'Of course we'd dare,' cried Mickie. 'Let's think how we could do it.'

A hectic discussion followed as to how this plan could be put into action, just what they should paint, and where and how to paint it. At first the schemes were wild and impractical, but at length the common sense of Robert and Jane dominated their hare-brained brother and sister.

Night was the only possible time for a counter-attack of this nature, and certainly, to-night seemed the best time. One thing was obvious to all, and that was that the attacking enemy would have to get sail from

Port Lorrimer. The children had no idea what time Mr. Larch went to bed, if indeed he went to bed at all, for they could not imagine the boat-yard without that genial presence. More likely, they thought, he curls up in a corner of the shed, with a fender for a pillow and a sail for a blanket.

'It's no good,' said Robert. 'We shall have to do it to-night. The *Gertie May* will probably never play into our hands like this again. We don't even know if she's staying here the night, but we'll have to take a chance on that. Someone will have to go home and get the sleeping things. They're rather heavy, so I think it'd better be Sally and me. The twins can row us ashore somewhere near here. Then we'll walk down to the boat-yard and tell Mr. Larch we shan't be in to-night. If we just don't turn up to-night he'll think we're drowned and might kick up a shindy.'

'We can say we're leaving the boat at Chiswick or Barnes. He said we should get tide-bound before we were much older, didn't he?' said Sally.

'Yes, so he did. That's all right, then. After that we can go home, break the news to Heidi – how do you think she'll take it? It's a good thing Edith's gone home – and get the camping things down here. Then we can set the tents, cook some supper and go to bed earlyish. We'll borrow Heidi's alarm-clock, and set it for one in the morning; then we'll get up without a sound and row up to the *Gertie May*.'

Jane felt a shiver of anticipation run through her.

'Wizard!' cried Mickie. 'And then?'

'Then we'll creep alongside and write whatever it is we're going to write in enormous letters from stem to stern.'

'Suppose we can't reach?' suggested Jane.

'Good old Pug-face the pessimist!' cried Robert, while Sally, touching Jane's most tender spot, her inability to climb, said:

'Anyway, if the worst comes to the worst, we can always make you climb *Esmeralda's* mast with the paint-pot.'

'Which reminds me,' said Robert. 'The paint. Have we any money on us?'

'Fivepence,' said Mickie.

'Elevenpence,' from Jane.

And Sally added: 'I've actually got half a crown.'

'Riches,' said Robert: 'with my threepenny bit. I say, you know,' he added thoughtfully, 'we'll have to go a bit easy on money, what with bus-fares and things. It's a pity we had to give Heidi that two pounds from the journey money, for the housekeeping, though I bet we must have eaten nearly that already.'

'Oh, well,' said Sally cheerfully, 'we've got four and a penny now, so why worry till we have to?'

This seemed sensible advice so Robert collected all the coins and helped pack the picnic basket and store what was left over from lunch in one of the hidden biscuit-tins.

'We'll be gone about three hours, I should think, so

round about six o'clock keep your ears open and we'll call fairly softly: *ESMERALDA* AHOY!

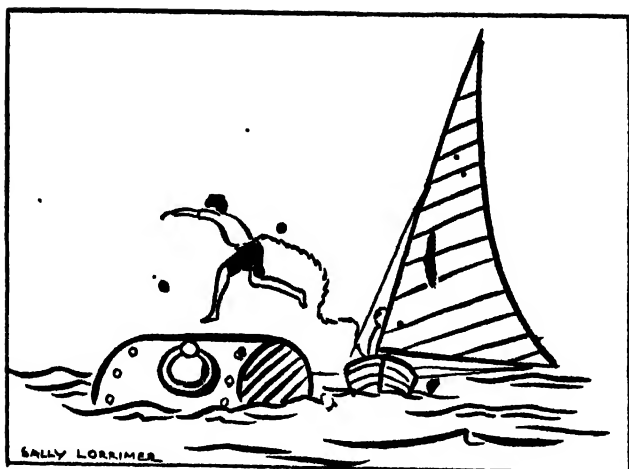
'O.K.,' said Mickie with the dignity of one who is about to be left in charge of a defence force.

'It's not worth hoisting sail, the tide will take us down,' said Robert as they climbed into *Esmeralda*. 'We'll head for that landing-stage by the *Stork*, and slip ashore there.' You two may have a bit of a pull over the tide getting home, but that'll use up some of young Mike's surplus energy.

They brought up nicely by the hard, and Robert and Sally disembarked.

'Good-bye,' they said. 'Take care of yourselves.'

'Buy some sausages for supper!' called Mickie as they disappeared over the river wall.



CHAPTER 10

LEFT ON THEIR OWN in *Esmeralda*, the twins felt positively shivery with excitement.

'I say,' suggested Mickie, 'we might just as well set a sail and sail back to Port Lorrimer.'

'Oh, Mickie, do you think we could?'

'Rather! Now remember, I'm in command - you'll have to be mate and Able Seamen all in one, so look slippery.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

A very different man was Mickie in charge of a ship, from the careless, irresponsible individual under someone else's command.

'Now,' he said, 'you hang on forrard, and I'll hoist the sail – it'd be a bit heavy for you – then I'll nip back to the tiller and you shove off.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

'And take care you don't fall in, and then hoist the jib and let down the centre-plate.'

'Aye, aye, sir.'

The sail shot up with a will, but unfortunately neither of them had thought to unloose the mainsheet. The sail filled and before either of the twins realised what was happening, *Emeralda* was driven against the landing-stage with a grinding creak of wood-work.

'Oh, Mickie!' quavered Jane, hearing the paint scrape against the harsh stones.

'Shut up!' cried the harassed mariner. 'Hold her off all you can, while I loose the mainsheet.'

It was not an easy business getting under way, but finally they succeeded. By then the tide had carried them some considerable way down-stream, and they were well under the lee of the *Stork*, whose vast bulk entirely blanketed the wind.

It is an unpleasant and ignominious feeling to sit in a sailing-ship that is proceeding backwards, and the twins felt their position keenly. They were terrified that at any moment a score of boys would poke their heads through the port-holes of the training ship and jeer at them for their incompetence.

Jane soon found it unbearable.

'I'm going to row!' she cried, waiting for no orders from her commanding officer.

'All right,' he grunted.

She hurled herself on to the centre thwart and soon had row-locks and oars in position. She pulled away savagely, but her small strength was useless against the tide.

'Are we gaining?' she gasped.

'Not an inch. Move up. I'll take an oar.'

This combination proved a fiasco, for Mickie pulled Jane round in no time, so that the bow yawed from side to side, and the tempers of the two rowers became dangerously frayed.

'Pull harder!'

'I can't! Don't pull so hard.'

'I must!'

Finally, in a last desperate effort to hold her own against Mickie, Jane caught a crab, the oar shot out of the row-lock and she tumbled backwards off the thwart into the bottom of the boat. This settled matters and the tide had its way. They slipped stern first past the *Stork*.

All at once a ruffle of breeze filled the sail. Mickie shipped his oar and leapt to the helm.

'Ship your oar, Pug, and get up. You're not dead yet.'

'I'm so sorry, Mickie. I was trying so hard.'

'That's all right, old girl,' said Mickie magnanimously, fancying himself once more master of the

situation. 'We'll take a leg across the river and be back at the island in no time.'

Alas for his hopes. *Esmeralda* sailed gallantly across the river, but she made no progress up-stream, the tide carrying her all the time away from the island. It was some minutes before Jane realised this, and when she did she hardly liked to mention it to Mickie, whose face, lifted to the wind, now looked so strenuous and confident.

'I say, Mickie,' she began tentatively.

'Don't talk to the man at the wheel,' he replied. 'I'm getting every inch out of the wind.'

'I know, but the tide!' wailed Jane. 'The tide!'

'What about it?' he replied, not taking his eyes off the quivering leech.

'Well, look!'

Mickie lowered his eyes and looked for a moment at the bank. He gave a long-drawn whistle.

'Gosh!'

'What shall we do? We'll never get back to Port Lorrimer.'

'Rot, of course we will! Don't jitter. We'll try the other tack. Ready about - LEE O!'

Esmeralda came about beautifully, and the twins certainly managed well, Mickie checking the tiller at just the right moment. Jane peered over the bow, convinced by Mickie's stirring tones that all would now be well.

'We're fairly cutting through the water!' she shouted.

'But the land! Look at the land!' cried Mickie, and this time the note of desperation was in his voice. Jane looked, but really this phenomenon was past her reasoning. Shut your eyes, and from the satisfactory swish of moving water you would say that *Esmeralda* was proceeding up-stream at a spanking speed; open them and you saw that she was re-fighting stern-foremost towards the City of London.

'We're nearly at the boat-yard. Shall we put in there?'

'Not on your life!' cried Mickie, sucking out the Lorrimer chin.

Jane prayed fervently that Mr. Larch would not look up, but of course he did.

'Where're yer for? Thought yer was at Barnes?'

'So we are!' called Jane.

'Oh, ah,' he replied with infinite understanding, and Jane added:

'At least we were, and we're going back.'

'Oh ah,' he repeated, and bent again to his painting, chuckling to himself.

'That'll larn 'em who's master, Man or Nature, Nature or Man! That'll larn 'em!'

Mickie meanwhile was thinking fast. He saw in his mind's eye all those long blue curves that marked on their map the full extent of the London River, and he was wondering round just how many the tide would sweep them before it turned. But he wasn't going to give in – he wasn't going to admit defeat. If the worst

came to the worst he'd turn *Esmeralda* round and head for the mouth of the river, as though that was where he meant to be going.

'I'm going to tack again, Jane.'

This time the manoeuvre was not so successful, and it took a tricky bit of handling with the jib to get *Esmeralda* round at all, which, of course, lost them even more ground.

'The bridge!' thought Jane, but she didn't say anything because she guessed by the furtive glances Mickie kept shooting over his shoulder that he knew all about that. She prayed silently 'Oh, God, make it all right. Don't let us hit the bridge. Oh, God, it doesn't matter about Mickie and me, but keep *Esmeralda* safe.' And in between prayers she thought he had never admired Mickie more. She knew he had the wind up by the set of his mouth, but he was very calm and even made little jokes.

'Anyway, Pug-face, we can always call on the Bishop of London for tea. Do you remember we saw his palace marked just near Putney Bridge?'

'Yes,' said Jane. 'Let's. He confirmed Mummy, you know.'

At the mention of Mummy, Jane's control wavered. Hammersmith Bridge was coming up very fast, and its great iron bulk looked menacing and dreadful. She was quite certain they would hit and then they'd never see Mummy again, nor Paddy, nor Robert, nor Sally — Oh dear, oh dear!

Into her reverie Mickie's voice cut, calm and decisive:

'And remember, Pug, if we should hit it and upset, don't try and swim, cling to a bit of *Esmeralda*. Robert said she would never sink with these ballast tanks.'

'Aye, aye, sir!' cried Jane, rallying all the forces of mate and Able Seamen into a smile.

In another moment the bridge was upon them. The huge pylon seemed to rush towards them. They held their breath, and Jane's eyes found and held Mickie's in a look from which both of them with heroic effort managed to exclude any hint of fear. There was a moment's quiet from wind, a moment's dark shadow, and, miracle of miracles, they were through. Jane gasped with relief, and Mickie, looking nonchalantly up-river, whistled a few bars of 'Pop Goes the Weasel' and said suddenly:

'I say, Jane, I'm sick of going backwards. I'm going to ware ship and sail down-stream. If we can't go forwards we may as well look as though we want to go the way we're going.'

Esmeralda came round without any to-do and they turned their backs on the now familiar Hammersmith Reach and faced the unknown. If they hadn't been haunted by their failure to 'nake Port Lorrimer it would have been a lovely sail.

'Pug!' exclaimed Mickie suddenly. 'I've got it! See those big mooring-buoys? Make the jib fast and come and take the helm. We'll head straight for one of those

buoys. Just before we get there, let go the mainsheet – that'll empty the sail of wind and take off speed – and I'll jump from the fore-deck on to the buoy and make fast.'

Jane came aft reluctantly. She thought it was a terribly dangerous plan, but another glance at the set of Mickie's jaw told her that it was useless to argue.

'Aye, aye, sir,' she said, changing places.

'Keep her as she goes.'

Jane, never happy in a following wind, spent some hideous moments expecting a gybe. They bore down on the first black buoy, a huge thing big enough to moor a liner. Mickie stood on the fore-deck, *Esmeralda's* painter tied round his waist.

'Now!' he cried. 'Let go jib and mainsheets.'

Quick as lightning Jane obeyed and Mickie jumped. A moment's scramble, and he had the big ring in both hands.

'Got her!' he cried, then: 'Ouch!' as *Esmeralda* felt the check and swung round to wind and tide, tugging savagely at the rope about his waist.

He soon transferred this from his middle to the mooring-ring, and made it fast before jumping back into the boat.

'Now,' he said, rather breathlessly, 'we'll get the sails down and think.'

They thought for a long time without much success, and really the most sensible suggestion was Jane's. She wanted to make for the shore, land, and pull *Esmeralda*

over the tide from the tow-path, by hand. It was a practical suggestion but undignified, and Mickie wouldn't hear of it.

'You can't tow a ship like that.'

'Why not? Barges do.'

'We're not a barge, we're a sailing-ship. And anyway, this isn't a canal, it's a tidal river leading down to the sea.'

'We could pretend we were tugs.'

'Fat lot of use that would be! No one would know we were tugs. Suppose Sqranty saw us.'

Yes, that settled it. *Esmeralda* could not be exposed to enemy gaze at a disadvantage.

The situation was becoming pretty nearly desperate when Mickie spied a police launch coming up-river.

'Police,' he said. 'Suppose it's Jim.'

'It is Jim,' cried Jane, standing up and rocking the boat perilously in her excitement.

'Sit down and keep quiet! We mustn't let anyone know that we didn't *mean* to be here.'

Jane sat down but continued to wave, and the police boat swerved out of its course and came towards them.

'Who do you think you are?' called Jim. 'The *Queen Mary*?'

'No-oh,' quavered Jane, as Mickie called out in a rather over-confident voice:

'Can you tell us when the tide turns?'

'Not yet awhile by any means,' said Jim cheerfully.

Mickie and Jane exchanged horrified glances. Robert

and Sally would be back at any moment now, and there would be nobody there to meet them. Jim noticed that something was wrong.

'Anything amiss?' he asked kindly.

'Oh, go on, Mickie! Tell him,' said Jane. 'After all, he is a policeman, sort of, and almost Salcombe.'

'All right,' said Mickie, reluctantly. 'You see, it's like this: Jane and I want to get to Chiswick Eyot by six, very particularly – we're meeting the others – and we just couldn't quite make it against this tide.'

'It really is important!' added Jane earnestly.

'Well,' Jim considered a moment, 'I don't know as I ought to help you, seeing as you're not in difficulties, but moored all neat and shipshape. But there,' he added with a twinkle, as their faces fell, 'I dare say I could stretch a point for a pal – so slip, 'is your painter and I'll give you a tow up.'

'Oh, thank you, Jim!' chorused the twins, and Mickie leapt overboard off to the buoy once more.

'Careful there,' cried Jim in alarm. 'There's no need for circus tricks.'

'Oh, that's nothing,' said Jane proudly, and before Mickie could stop her, was recounting the whole tale to Jim.

He shook with laughter as he made fast the tow-rope, then said: 'Come aboard. She'll tow better that way, and we'll be up-stream in no time.'

As they sped along they questioned Jim cautiously about their island, making, of course, no mention of

their camp. He told them that it belonged to a body called the Port of London Authority, but that it was very rarely visited, and was tactful enough not to ask why they wished to be landed there. He enquired kindly after Robert and Sally, and asked to be remembered to them.

Under this friendly treatment it was not long before their spirits soared again, and very soon, indeed, they began to feel they had actually done something heroic. Not so, Mr. Larch, however. Seeing them swish past, he was too disgusted even to return their triumphant greeting. He scanned *Esmeralda* hopefully for a moment to see if she was in a sinking condition, for that to him would have been the sole reason for giving up the struggle. Then, seeing her trim and tight as ever, he turned his back upon the whole scene.

'Huh!' he muttered, stabbing viciously at his paint pot. 'Spoilin' good sailors! They don't want men in the river police, wat they wants is a lot o' bloomin' nursemaids!'



CHAPTER XI

'*ESMERALDA*, AHoy! *Esmeralda*, ahoy!' The twins had hardly moored *Esmeralda*, and said good-bye to Jim, before they heard the agreed signal floating over the water. They leapt aboard and shoved off.

'I say, Jane,' blurted out Mickie suddenly, as they drew near the shore, 'best not say anything to the others.' For a moment Jane looked rather crestfallen. Already in her mind she was planning a glowing account in which complete accuracy was perhaps to be sacrificed to dramatic effect. Loyalty to her twin triumphed, however. .

'All right,' she agreed. 'No; a word.'

Robert's first words were:

'Is she still there?'

'Who?' began Mickie, then suddenly remembering:
'Oh, the *Gertie*! Oh, rather!'

'Goodness,' he thought; 'suppose she isn't!' For in the heat of their own adventures they had temporarily forgotten all about her. Fortunately this lapse passed unnoticed, for Robert and Sally had plenty to say.

'Heidl didn't mind a bit us not coming back to-night. She said when she was a girl she used to go off with her brothers into the mountains for weeks on end, and when she was only fourteen she lived all one summer in a hut miles away from anyone, all by herself with a herd of cows. So that's all right. Oh, and fancy nearly forgetting - most important of all - here's a letter from Mummy; it came by the second post. I'll read it aloud while you row.'

The letter began, as all their mother's letters to them did: 'My darling ducklings,' since the day many years ago at Salcombe, when old James, looking on while they bathed, had remarked: 'Them little Lorrimers, they be like young ducklings in the water.'

Writing just after she had sent the cable, Mrs. Lorrimer went on to say that their father's wound had proved much less serious than the doctors had first thought, and that he was now getting on splendidly.

'Darlings,' she continued, 'I was dismayed to hear that Aunt Mary couldn't leave you, and wonder why? I suppose she is going away and shutting the house up.

You poor things, how hateful for you to be stuck in London in your summer holidays, especially when we had planned such lovely things. I do know how dreary you must be finding it, but you are such sensible people that I'm sure you will find things to do.'

There followed various suggestions, such as bus-rides, visits to the cinema, swimming-baths and museums, any of which might once have thrilled the Lorrimer family, but filled them with scorn as they sat in their boat. Finally, however, came a passage which shook them out of their complacency.

'Anyhow,' wrote their mother, 'I am determined that you shan't be done out of all your fun. Daddy is really so much better that the doctors quite think he will be well enough to come home by ambulance plane soon. So you won't have long to wait now, my ducklings, and who knows, we might even get to Salcombe for a week or two after all!'

Sally's voice trailed off into silence, and the four children sat looking at one another blankly. It would be glorious to see Mummy and Daddy – it was heaven that Daddy was better – but —

'OH!' cried Jane, whose feelings always had to find expression in words. 'Oh dear, I do love Salcombe and I do want to go there, but if we have to leave *Esmeralda* I'll DIE!'

Robert nodded, and Mickie, rubbing his hand up and down the tiller, stared wide-eyed across the river.

'Look here,' said Sally at last, 'it's no good worrying about things until they happen. All that really matters is that Daddy is all right. In the meantime here we are, and here's *Esmeralda* – and, Robert, if you don't look out we'll be into that sculling-boat – you haven't made any headway for the last ten minutes, so come on *Do*, and buck up, or we'll never get Port Lorrimer established.'

The mention of Port Lorrimer was enough to drive all other considerations out of their minds. Robert set to and rowed with a will, and in a few minutes they had beached *Esmeralda* and were clambering ashore.

Robert, once a Scout and now a member of the J.T.C., was skilled in the art of setting up a camp, and as soon as the gear was unloaded took the situation in hand.

'Now,' he cried, 'jump to it! Mickie and I will get up the tents, and you two sort the rest into two piles.'

They worked quietly and methodically, and soon the two small tents stood taut and trim side by side, well sheltered by bushes from the public gaze, with ground-sheets smoothly laid beneath sleeping-bags and neatly folded clothing.

'Supper,' said Sally, and Robert set to work on the Primus. The others watched him in some trepidation, but Primuses are sensitive things, and, like horses, quick to feel the hands of a master. There was nothing fumbling or inexpert about Robert's fingers as he set

to work with pricker, methylated and paraffin, and very soon, at a few strokes of the pump, the Primus broke into that vital, healthy hiss that signified it was about to do its work properly. Sally produced a paper bag full of sausages, which set Mickie squeaking with delight, and he pricked each one tenderly with a marlin spike before they were cooked in a large open pan. The sizzling fat was used up by frying great chunks of bread in it after the sausages were cooked.

When all was prepared the Lorrimers settled themselves by the waterside for one of the loveliest meals of their lives.

'Just think,' Sally sighed contentedly. 'Food we've cooked ourselves, in our own camp, and there's our own boat floating in our own river, and here we are sitting on our own island.'

'But Sally,' said the literal Jane, 'it isn't exactly our own island. Jim said it belonged to someone called the P.L.A.'

'JIM said!' exclaimed Robert. 'But how does he know we're here? When did you see him?'

Jane flushed and stammered, but Mickie interrupted swiftly:

'Oh, of course, we forgot to tell you - we saw Jim and waved and he came and talked to us. He says it's quite all right, because although this belongs to the P.L.A. (that means Port of London Authority, you know), they don't really want it - anyway, they don't

use it for anything – so we're not trespassing, and since we're here we can call it ours.'

Jane relaxed, for Mickie appeared to have convinced their elders, without departing one word from the actual truth.

'You didn't tell him about Squinty Skinner mucking up our boat, did you?'

'Oh, no – you see, he didn't stop long.'

Further conversation was temporarily suspended by the more important business of eating, and by the time the last chocolate biscuit had vanished it was half-past eight, and a feeling of quietude was creeping over the river.

'We ought to get to bed now,' said Robert. 'I've borrowed an alarm-clock from Heidi, and we'll set it to wake us at midnight. It will give us a few hours' sleep, and we shouldn't take more than three-quarters of an hour to get our business with the *Gertie May* done.'

It seemed a pity to leave the lovely river scene and forget it all in sleep, but there was great attraction about creeping into the dim light of the tents, and the strange new sensation of snuggling into sleeping-bags clad in underwear.

Wakeful as they imagined themselves to be – Mickie, indeed, had planned to stay awake until the alarm went off – they had hardly time to call 'Good night' to one another, before they were all fast asleep.

Robert awoke with a shock. What was that extraordinary noise under his left ear? For a moment he could not make out where on earth he was, but rising on to his elbow he saw beside him the tousled head of his small brother, and was all at once wide awake. Of course -- Port Lorrimer -- the tent. It must be midnight and the raid due to start. Beneath the pillow he had made of his folded coat the alarm-clock continued its hideous clangour, and now he reached quickly for the little lever that would still it to silence. He listened, but there was no sound to indicate that the clock had woken the others. Everything was uncannily still and very dark. He felt a momentary reluctance to shake his brother and sisters back into consciousness, but *Esmeralda* must be avenged, and personal comfort was but a small sacrifice to make on her behalf.

The girls roused at the merest touch on the canvas of their tent, and in a moment churring whispers showed that they were wide awake. Mickie, however, only responded to the roughest treatment, and had to be dragged to a sitting position before his eyes would remain open.

As they emerged from their tents the children were all struck by the uncanny beauty of the river at night-time. Like a broad band of black velvet it flowed between the shadowy banks, and now, with no London noises to disconcert the ear, small waterside noises could be heard -- the slight breeze ruffling the surface of the water, the lap of little waves upon the shore,

and the distant creak of mooring-ropes straining in the tide.

The Lorrimers' first thought had been to sail up to the *Gertie May*, but Robert decided so large an expanse of white would pick up any glimmer of light, and mean almost certain detection by the enemy. Besides, as he pointed out, the tide would take them most of the way, with but a few deft strokes of the oars.

'We must muffle the oars,' breathed Jane. A whispered conversation followed as to the best method of doing this, and finally Sally's stockings were wrapped round and round the rowlocks.

They launched *Esmeralda*, and quietly as they could, climbed in, one by one. Each of them felt their breath coming in great smothering gusts of excitement, and their hearts thudded with trepidation. Now at this strange midnight hour, with which none of them was familiar, dangers loomed larger. Robert felt a sudden sense of guilt. Was he right in leading his brother and sisters into this adventure? A false move – an unguarded cough – might wake Ben Skinner or his unsavoury son, and Jim and Mr. Larch had warned them that these two were not to be trifled with. If caught in the middle of their painting they would certainly receive small mercy at their enemy's hands. He would not put it above them to scuttle *Esmeralda* and fling her crew into the river to sink or swim. Robert put his hand into the river, and felt the water close around it, cold and dank. Suppose they did get chucked in, so

would the water close over their heads, cold and dank. Useless to scream or call. At that late hour there would be no one to hear or help.

'I say,' he began, 'perhaps we'd better go back.'

'GO BACK!' cried the others, startled out of a whisper.

'Ssssh! Yes, go back.'

'But, Robert, why? You're not afraid, are you?'

'Of course not, not for myself, I mean, but it's a bit risky for all of you.'

'Risky, of course it is. That's what's so lovely. . . .

Unanimous in their determination to revenge, they soon overruled Robert's half-hearted twinge of conscience.

'I say,' asked Jane suddenly, 'what are we going to paint?'

'Gosh! We never decided

For a moment they thought furiously, but each suggestion sounded futile when voiced aloud. Finally, as they drew near their goal, desperation rather than literary merit decided them to accept a suggestion Jane had put forward a trifle self-consciously

KEEP CLEAR

CAN'T STEER

Ten yards from the *Gertie May*, Robert silenced them with a gesture, and signed to Mickie to put the fenders over the side. He looked anxiously over his shoulder as he rowed - a few more strokes now, and

he would be alongside. Suppose the tide caught them as he swung *Esmeralda* around and they bumped! Suppose — 'Rot!' he said to himself, and sticking out his underlip to dispel all doubts, he concentrated on bringing *Esmeralda* alongside.

It was beautifully done, and Mickie, for once deft and silent, slipped the painter round *Gertie May's* mooring-rope, whilst Robert shipped oars without a sound. There was a pause, whilst the *Lorimers* recovered from the breathless strain of their arrival. Robert then prised the lid off the paint-pot and whispered under his breath: 'A word each, in age.'

The others watched him, shivering with excitement, as in letters more than a foot high he wrote KEEP. He finished the P with a flourish and handed the brush to Sally. Mickie slacked off the painter, *Esmeralda* slipped quietly up-stream a few feet, and Sally set to work on a nice blank space. Then it was Mickie's turn. CANT, he wrote in shaky characters and held out the brush to Jane.

Alas, poor Jane! Her hands, trembling with excitement, failed to close about the handle as Mickie relinquished it. With a 'splish' it fell into the river. She squeaked and threw her hands in the air with alarm, but Sally, swift as a striking hawk, shot out her hand and caught the brush as it floated by on the tide. They waited breathlessly to see if so much sudden movement had disturbed the occupants of the *Gertie May*, but the silence remained unbroken.

'Juggins!' whispered Sally, and gave the brush to Jane, who this time seized it with fervent fingers, and wrote her piece without mishap.

The completed message shone white in the moonlight, and stretched the whole length of the *Gertie May*.

'Now, what about the other side? Is there enough paint?'

'Heaps,' replied Jane.

Mickie let go the painter, and gathered it slowly in, so that it made no sound as it passed through the water. The other three held *Esmeralda* off with careful hands, and pulling on the *Gertie May's* rope fend-off, worked their way up to her port bow.

Jane had just begun work on *WHEELER* when the silence was broken by *PRRI.RRRRRR* – the hum of a fast motor-boat. She stopped painting, and Robert breathed:

'Gosh! What's that? Police?' and peered round the stern. A light was coming up-river at great speed, and even as he watched he heard the sudden whine of an engine thrown out of gear.

'Crikey!' he said. 'It's coming here.'

There was no time to escape, no time to plan. They crouched in the shadow of the ship and prayed that the motor-boat would come alongside to starboard. They sat in hideous suspense until a thud and a jerk told them that the boat had arrived. A beam of light shone over their heads, as a powerful torch raked the deck of the *Gertie May*, and there was the sound of

rough voices, and the heavy tread of someone unaccustomed to boats climbing aboard, followed by another who leapt nimbly on to the deck.

A light came on in the deck-house, and Ben Skinner's voice was heard.

'So you got here all right. Come below.

A guttural grunt answered him, and the two figures, outlined for a moment against the night sky, disappeared down the companionway:

As quickly and quietly as he could, Robert began to work *Esmeralda* along with his hands towards the bow of the *Gertie May*, intending to untie the painter and get away while the going was good. To do this, however, they would have to pass the open port of the tug's cabin, and however low the children might themselves crouch down, the mast of their boat would have to travel across the beam of light that shone out into the darkness. It seemed impossible that it should not be seen, and for a moment, utterly nonplussed, Robert crouched motionless in the bows.

A murmur of voices could now be heard through the port, and all at once Ben Skinner's voice broke out loud and harsh, drowning all the rest.

'Now come on, mister, get to it! You know what I'm 'ere for, and I know what you want, so let's cut aht the spit an' polish. The perlice does regular patrol's past 'ere, an' if they was ter see your boat they might come arskin' questions.'

At the mention of the police, the four crouching

figures in the dinghy stiffened, and Robert craned nearer to listen, all thought of escape momentarily forgotten.

'Very well, my friend,' said a voice with a strong foreign accent, 'I also have no time to waste. You can be ready for him Friday, eh? Friday is best. Thursday would be too soon after. I have some place for him to sleep that night, and Friday they will not watch so close. They will think him gone.'

'Seems to me they'll watch pretty close anyways,' came Ben Skinner's surly accents.

'Ah, but not the river. They won't think of the river. It is his only chance, and it means much money for you, so why should you worry?'

'That's all very well, but it'd mean years in jug for me if I was copped.'

Here a new voice broke in – an educated voice with a slight lilt to it.

'You won't be copped, Skinner. We don't make mistakes.'

'Well, when do I get me money? That's wot I wants ter know. Remember, a hundred quid is me last word, or you can find someone else to do your dirty work, and mark you me, knowing what I does won't make it any easier for you.'

The last was said in such menacing tones that Sally and Jane felt a shiver run through them.

The other two voices consulted together, and finally the cultured voice said: 'Very well then, one hundred

pounds it is. He should reach you sometime after dark Friday, and I'll come aboard around eleven p.m. and bring you the cheque.'

'Now then, now then, none of that and you knows it. It's cash for me, nice honest to God Treasury notes with no names or give away nonsense on them. Eleven Friday you hands me the dibs all square and above board, and I can get away on the cbb at midnight.'

'Right. It shall be Treasury notes if you wish. You're right in a sense. We can't be too careful. In fact, I always am very careful. . .

The last words were snapped out simultaneously with the sound of a door being wrenched open. There was a cry, a heavy thud and an oath from Ben Skinner.

'Squinty, you young

'So,' the soft tones spoke again, 'Master Skinner is also interested in our deliberations, is he?'

There came a yelp of pain from Squinty, at which Mickie wriggled with savage glee.

'I wasn't listenin',' whined the culprit. 'Honest I wasn't.'

'Maybe you weren't, my young friend, but as you doubtless heard me saying, I'm always very careful. Now, you little rat,' the voice crackled suddenly with venom. 'Get on deck and stay there, d'you hear me? We don't . . .'

But the Lorrimers heard no more. Quick as a flash, Robert whipped his knife from its sheath and in a few

frenzied movements slashed the painter through. As the last strands parted he shoved with all his might against the side of the *Gertie May*, the tide caught *Esmeralda's* bow, and in a moment they were drifting swiftly and silently up-stream.

The other three were still more or less dazed with the suddenness of the emergency, but Robert pushed them ruthlessly aside as he snatched up the oars. With strong, expert strokes he swept them up the river, and not till the outline of the *Gertie May* had faded into the blackness of the night did he guide *Esmeralda* to the opposite bank and turn her nose homewards.

'Gosh!' began Mickie in a penetrating whisper.

'Shut up, you fool!' hissed the skipper. He paused for a moment to wipe his forehead with the back of his hand, and was surprised to find the sweat clammy upon it. Then he bent to his oars again, exerting all his force now to make headway against the tide.

Not another word was spoken until they reached the island. They dragged the boat ashore, stowed her sails and made her fast for the night, still with no comment save for an occasional muttered direction. This done, Robert led the way back to the camp.

'Now,' he said, 'food's what we need.'

'Soup,' said Sally. 'Get the Primus going while I open a tin.'

It was not long before they were sipping the hot, comforting liquid of mulligatawny soup, and then at last Robert consented to talk.

'I say,' he said, 'we seem to have hit something pretty serious.'

'What can it be?' asked Jane in a thrilling whisper.

'Crumbs!' exclaimed Mickie. 'That was a narrow shave if ever there was one. What do you suppose they'd have done if they'd caught us?'

'Good old Robert,' said Sally in a voice that was not entirely steady.

'Yes, my hat, you were quick at the draw,' cried Mickie, and he thumped his brother on the back in a glow of admiration.

'Tripe,' said Robert brusquely. 'But I must say I got a bit of a shock when I heard them talking about the police like that. Of course, we knew Ben Skinner was a pretty good louse, but I'd no idea he was a real wrong 'un.'

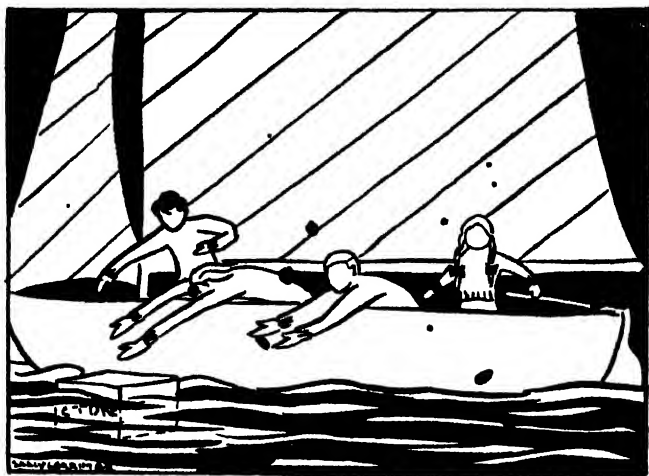
For a few moments longer they discussed what they had overheard, but now that they were back in their own camp, they felt positively drained of strength after the excitement of the past hour. The hot soup was doing its work, and one by one their heads began to nod. A sudden snore from Mickie made them all jump, and Robert rose to his feet.

'Come on, chaps,' he said. 'We simply must get some sleep. It's nearly two o'clock. We can discuss all this in the morning.'

Too tired to protest, they bade each other good night for a second time and crept into their tents.

'I say, Robert,' said Mickie valiantly, as he wriggled

back into his sleeping-bag, 'if you'd like me to stay awake and do sentry duty, just say . . . jus' . . . say . . .'
his voice trailed away and was lost in sleep, and once again silence settled on Port Lórrimer.



CHAPTER 12

JANE WAS THE FIRST to wake the next morning. The others had stirred and grunted once or twice, but sleep lay heavy upon them after their midnight adventure, and they turned over each time and closed their eyes again. Not so Jane. Tired as she was, she had gone to bed the night before in a state of holy rapture, pinching herself, and telling herself softly: 'Surrounded by dangerous enemies, the Able Seamen hardly closed their eyes that night, and the bravest of them was awake with the dawn. Dawn . . . dawn . . . dawn. . . .'

Accordingly, she had hardly opened her eyes before she was crawling out of her sleeping-bag. This she did

with immense care so as not to wake Sally. The tiny tent was filled with the soft glamorous gloom that means sunshine outside. Jane scrambled somehow into her jersey and shorts, and then, taking her shoes in her hand, wriggled out through the opening.

It was such a perfect morning that she sprang to her feet with a little snort of delight. The sun shone steadily out of a cloudless sky, and the river lapped the weeds with a little caressing sound. Birds were singing in the bushes, and as a couple of ducks landed with a swish of wings on the water, Jane rubbed her eyes, and wondered if this could really be London.

The hoarse voice of a steamer down by Hammer-smith Bridge brought her back to reality, and it occurred to her that it would be well to see what the enemy were up to. She slipped on her shoes and creeping warily to the other end of the island peered up-river. There was no sign of the *Gertie May*, and for a moment Jane wondered if she had dreamed the whole fantastic adventure of the previous night. She looked again, and saw the great buoy to which the tug had been moored, bobbing aimlessly in the tide, and realised then that Ben Skinner must have taken advantage of the first of the ebb to get away down-river.

Filled with the importance of this discovery, Jane hurried back to the camp, to see the tousled head of Mickie protruding from the boys' tent.

'Hist!' she whispered dramatically. 'What's the time?'

'I dunno; how long've you been up?'

'Oh, about - well, quite a bit.' Jane's incurable honesty always spoilt her attempts to impress. 'And I've got some news. Come out.'

'All right. Half a sec,' and Mickie's head bobbed inside the tent again, to reappear in a moment, followed by the rest of him, clad in much the same clothing as Jane.'

'Well, what is it?'

'The *Gertie May's* gone.'

'Gone? Dash it! Did you see her go?'

'No, she must have gone off on the top of the tide,' said Jane, feeling very nautical.

'That's a blow. I wanted to see how she looked. Never mind, though. I bet she gives them a good laugh down the river. I say, what about breakfast?'

'Well, I was going to get it ready, but we can't cook it until Robert wakes up and works the Primus.'

'Oh, I could easily --' began Mickie, but something in his sister's face made him add reluctantly: 'Oh, all right, let's call the others. Not that I couldn't work it easily if I wanted to. I think I really understand machinery better than Robert in a sort of way.'

A discordant yodel brought both the senior officers scrambling out of their tents, and it was not long before bacon and eggs were sizzling merrily on the Primus, while Jane cut huge slabs of bread and butter. As soon as the more acute pangs of hunger had been

satisfied, discussion turned to the problem of the *Gertie May*.

By the light of day, their suspicions of the night before seemed rather fantastic. 'The darkness of night may breed many fears, but once the sun is up, there holds sway, in the mind of the ordinary person, one above all others, and that is the fear of looking foolish.'

'I wish to goodness we knew just what it is they're up to,' said Robert, mopping up the last of his bacon-fat with a crust.

'I should think we ought to tell Jim to arrest them quick,' declared Jane, 'before they do do anything.'

'That's where the Law is so stupid,' said Robert. 'You can't arrest someone before they do something; you seem to have to wait until they've done it.'

'Well, you could frame up some pretence charge,' said Mickie, and added with blood-thirsty glee: 'Then they could use a bit of third-degree on them to find out what they were really up to. I'd help 'em, too.'

'Anyway, I think we ought to tell the police,' said Jane.

'Oh yes,' replied the skipper; 'and jolly fine fools we should look if we found they were just planning to unload a cargo of cork, or something.'

'Oh, Robert, they *can't* be,' exclaimed Sally. 'It really did sound awfully queer, the way they talked about "Him" all the time, and then what Ben Skinner said about the police, don't you remember?'

'Now you say that, I do, and it does sound pretty

fishy, I must say. But I don't see how you could prove anything, and as I say you can't arrest anyone without what they call "proof conclusive." Ben Skinner'd simply swear himself black and blue in the face that we were lying, and so would the other men, whoever they were, and, of course, they'd get away with it because they're grown up and we're not.'

'Well then,' cried Mickie, 'why don't we follow them down the river and do a bit of sleuthing until we've got "proof thingumitight"?''

'But we'd never catch them up, you silly crumpet!'

'But we don't need to catch them up. We know they're going to be on the river, because don't you remember the foreign man said: "They won't think of the river - the river is his only chance," and they kept on burbling something about "Friday will do. Friday is best." And anyway if we go down-river we're bound to meet them, because after all you can only go up and down a river, it's not like the sea where you can go all ways.'

'OH!' Sally leapt to her feet. 'Don't you see? It all fits in absolutely perfectly! We want to go down-river, we want to sail its very farthest limits, and here's our reason - and,' she pointed dramatically to the water, 'our tide.'

'Except that we've missed most of it,' objected the skipper rather dampingly, for he liked to do things in an orderly way. 'Of course, we might go home and get everything ready -'

'Oh no, no, NO!' cried Sally. 'Things are no fun unless you do them in the heat of the moment.'

'Oh, yes, Robert. Sally's right.'

For the first time the whole crew, officers and Able Seamen alike, rose up in open mutiny against the captain.

'We can't put it off!' they shrieked, all talking at once.

'Robert, we must start now, we *must*. The *Gertie May* may be anywhere, doing anything.'

'She's probably landing thousands of spies —' this from Mickie.

'Or an invading army,' said Jane, not to be outdone.

'Anyway,' concluded Sally, 'quite apart from the *Gertie May*, we want to sail to the Nore one day, and to-day's a perfect day and it'll 'probably pour to-morrow, and we can have a fair tide all the way, anyway, and if we don't do it to-day we probably never shall and — Oh, Robert, LET'S!'

Robert after all was only human, and since his own feelings coincided very nearly with those of his crew, there seemed to be nothing to do but let common sense go by the board. For a moment he looked enquiringly at Jane, but he saw he would get no support from her. Her face held the ecstatic look that betrayed she was far away in a world of verse, and her lips were moving softly as she murmured to herself:

‘I should adore
To see the Nore.’

‘All right,’ said Robert. ‘Go it is. But we must get under way as soon as we possibly can. The ebb must have run nearly four hours already. Mister, take a tally of the stores, please. We may be away a day or two, so we’ll want blankets and woollies and things, and cooking gear, but no frills mind, because we haven’t room. I’ll get *Esmeralda* ready, and the Second can help the men wash up and get all the stuff stowed. It’s nine-thirty now, and I want to get under way at two bells sharp. Can you do it?’

‘Aye, aye, sir,’ came in chorus from the crew.

‘Right, then jump to it.’

For the next half-hour everyone worked frenziedly. No traces of their camp must be left, for fear of marauders, so that all the things they were unable to take with them must be securely hidden. Here the secret hiding-places they had dug the day before proved invaluable, and with careful planning and packing a place was found for everything. The wonderful little tents folded away to minute packages, and took up very little space in *Esmeralda*’s locker. Less easy to stow, but obviously essential, were sleeping-bags, woollies, and warm clothing for everybody, including oilskins, ‘in case,’ as Sally thrillingly observed, ‘it’s rough at sea.’

At one moment it seemed barely possible that the

sea of chaos presented by the camp could be reduced to order that morning. Robert, however, in addition to being a stern disciplinarian, was a good organiser, and it was ten o'clock to the minute as Mickie let go *Esmeralda's* painter, and landed with a flying leap on her fore-deck. They reckoned that low tide must be about half-past eleven, which gave them a good hour and a half's fair tide to start them on their way, while the breeze that had now sprung up promised well for the later stages of their voyage.

The sun shone steadily, and rolling up their shirt-sleeves, they basked happily in its heat. Jerseys, of course, had long been discarded. As they drew level with Mr. Larch's boat-yard they set forth a united shriek of valediction, and he bobbed up like a Jack-in-the-box from the inside of a boat to wave at them.

'Where are you off to now?' he shouted, and with one accord the crew of the *Esmeralda* yelled:

'THE NORE!'

Whereupon Mr. Larch was heard to shout something about bringing him back some clogs from Holland. Satisfied with this tribute, they proceeded on their way.

They were soon under Hammersmith Bridge, and as they swept past Harrod's Furniture Depository Mickie and Jane exchanged guilty glances. The second mate suffered considerable anxiety lest his sister should feel impelled to confess their escapade of the day

before, but he need not have worried, for Jane would have died rather than betray her twin.

They were now entering unexplored waters, and gazed with fascinated eyes at the National Benzole Wharf, with *Ben Sadler*, a big motor-ship smartly painted in black and yellow, moored alongside. They were beginning to realise more than ever now what a highway of trade the London River is, and how the ships that moved upon its waters were as varied in type and nationality as those that sailed the broad face of the sea. Within sight of the smart British coaster, a stout Dutch motor-ship swung at her moorings in the stream, waiting until there should be enough water to come alongside the wharf and discharge her cargo. They spelled out her queer, heavy-sounding name, and marvelled that she could have come across the Channel with her top-heavy frame, which, sheer and high in the bow, went away to nothing amidships, to rise again in an alarmingly abrupt stern.

It was a long beat down to Putney Bridge, but the gusty puffs of the last few days had subsided to a more or less steady breeze. No breeze is ever really steady on the London River, because, whereas at one moment it can sweep merrily down upon you from the freedom of a riverside park, at the next it is trapped behind a warehouse, and emerges sideways, and with redoubled angry force, only to find that the river itself has now turned its back upon it and is careering off in a different direction.

All this, however, adds excitement to small boat-sailing, and the four children, taking turns at the tiller, learnt more that day than they might have done in many weeks at Salcombe. Reassured by their mother's letter that their father really was out of danger, delighted at having got their own back on the *Gertie May*, thrilled at the prospect of unravelling a real mystery, and the feeling that they were off on a voyage of adventure and discovery, it seemed that life had no more to offer.

'I can't believe it's true,' said Jane, sniffing the breeze like a small dog. 'It's the loveliest thing that ever happened to us, *ever*.'

'This is no ordinary voyage, Men,' declared Sally. 'Nobody knows what perils we may have to face. Starvation or wreck may be our fate. We may not be back for years and years, and when we do come back we shall be so old that no one will recognise us. We shall probably forget our native tongue.'

'I don't see why we should do that,' observed the Able Seamen sensibly. 'We could always practise on each other.'

'Our throats will probably be too parched with thirst to talk,' replied the first mate unmoved.

'I believe the natives of Dagenham are cannibals,' began Markie, but the more glorious flights of his imagination were cut short by the necessity of navigating Putney Bridge. This, however, proved easy at that state of the tide, and as they slipped under the railway

bridge that followed immediately, a scarlet Underground train thundered overhead. This, according to the Lorrimer code, was a lucky omen of the highest order and raised their hearts, if possible, even higher than before.

It was about here that the tide finally slackened, but knowing that the young flood took some time to gather strength, Robert, map in hand, felt confident of reaching Wandsworth Bridge at least before they had a serious stream to contend with.

'Keep her well into the bank now,' he commanded Mickie, who had the tiller. 'I don't think the tide runs so hard there.'

'Well I know,' said Mickie, surveying the high banks of Hurlingham Club. 'But we don't want to go so far in, we lose the wind, do we? Besides, we don't know what horrible savages might leap out at us from those dense jungles.'

'Pooh!' said Jane. 'I'm not afraid of a few savages. Why, I killed hundreds last time I was in these waters.'

'You've never been here before - they're unexplored, so there!'

'I have!'

'You haven't!'

'I HAVE!'

'Stow it, you two,' cried the skipper. 'And Mike, it's Jane's turn at the tiller now, anyhow.'

Released from his post, Mickie made a dive at the

locker, and routed out a bottle of lemonade. Since Robert was immersed once more in the chart, and Sally and Jane intent on navigation, nobody observed this manoeuvre until they were startled by the loud sucking noise that always concludes a really good drink out of a bottle.

'Mickie!' shrieked Sally. 'That's the iron rations. It's ~~was~~ last bottle.'

'But I was thirsty - and anyway, I haven't drunk it all. There's enough for everybody.'

'Look here,' said Robert: 'how are we off for stores, anyway? It seems to me we'll have to do a bit of foraging soon.'

'Well,' said Sally, 'we've got a lot really. I brought the Captain's Biscuits and the chocolate, and the tin of sardines and the rest of the bread, and then all that tinned stuff Heidl gave us I packed in this box.'

So saying Sally thrust an arm into the locker and pulled out the box, balancing it aloft on her hand, for the inspection of the crew. She was perched precariously on the weather gunwale, and at that moment *Esmeralda* heeled to a sudden puff of wind. Sally all but toppled backwards, flung out her arms to save herself, and the box shot from her hand to disappear with a mighty splash into the river.

For a moment they thought she would follow it, as she flung herself round with a despairing shriek and grabbed frantically at the water. But the box had sunk like a stone, and all she could do was to gaze after it

with such a horror-stricken face that the rest of the crew burst into a shout of laughter.

'Oh! Oh!' she wailed. 'What have I done? That's all our stores!'

'Well, never mind, Mister,' gasped Robert at last. 'That settles the food question, anyway. Now we shall have to get some more. Trouble is, we've only got one and a penny left, and that won't go far.'

'We'll have to sell something,' said Mickie promptly.

This seemed a brilliant idea, and for some moments they considered it, the only question being whether they had anything among them worth selling. Various ideas occurred to them, and were rejected, from Jane's tentative suggestion of their spare rope and shackles, to Mickie's plan that, since they were sailing and wouldn't be needing them, they should sell their shoes.

All at once Mickie stabbed at Jane's neck with his forefinger.

'I know! Pug – your locket!'

Jane's face fell.

'My christening locket! Oh, Mickie, I couldn't!'

'Of course you could! Why, it's solid gold – we'd probably get a fiver for it. Robert, she must, mustn't she?'

'Well, I dunno,' said Robert. 'It depends how she feels, really. I do think it's rather a good idea, because it's the only valuable thing we've got, and we do need money for food – but of course it is her locke. Still,'

he added hopefully, 'I expect you'll be as hungry as anyone, presently, Pug.'

But he need not have worried. Already the light of martyrdom was shining in Jane's eyes, and she was fascinated at the idea of being able to save the whole crew from starvation by the sacrifice of the cherished object.

'All right,' she said, in the tones of an early Christian going to the stake. 'All right, I don't mind really, not if it means food for you all.'

'And for you,' added Mickie tactlessly.

The all-important question now arose of where and how they should dispose of this sacrificial offering. They were very vague as to possible landing-places, but one and all had the firm, if conscious, impression that the City was the only home of pawn-shops. It was, therefore, decided, after much argument and debate, to moor *Ismeralda* at the first convenient spot, and make their lunch of what provisions they had, setting off afterwards to make as much progress as possible against the tide, in the hopes of being able to land and dispose of the locket farther down the river.

By the time it was settled, they had passed Wandsworth Bridge and were rounding the bend above Battersea, with the mighty bulk of the Lots Road Power Station frowning above them to port, while factories and warehouses of all kinds gloomed at them from the starboard bank. Several huge buoys were moored here, and as they were all beginning to feel

extremely hungry, they decided to tie up to one of these while they ate their lunch.

Robert, who was once more at the helm, and on the starboard tack, gave his mainsheet an extra pull, and put *Esmeralda's* nose well down into the stream, so as to counteract the force of the tide, which was now flowing strongly. Mickie leapt eagerly to the bows.

'Hold hard, I'll jump on to the buoy!'

'Sit still, you ass!' exclaimed the skipper in scandalised tones. 'There's no earthly need to do that, and you'd fall in, anyway

'I wouldn't,' protested Mickie, wounded to the quick. 'I did it all right before.'

'WHAT!' cried the senior officers with one voice, and just in time Mickie realised his mistake.

'Oh, I mean - well, jumping on things, you know,' he explained lamely, and reflected privately on the bitterness of deception, that made him thus dismiss his epic leap, when he was bursting to give a glowing account of it.

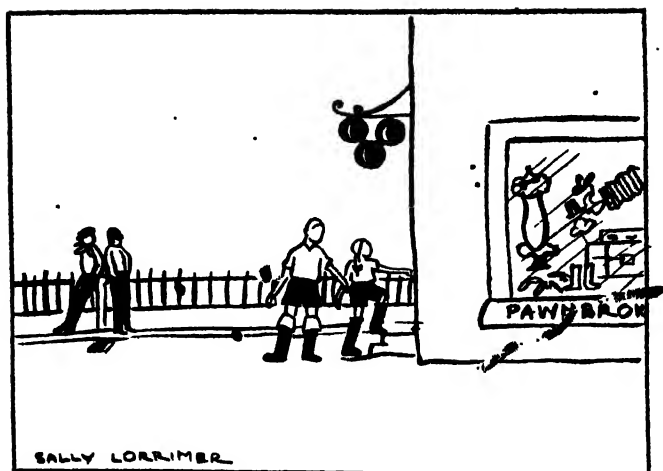
It was too late now to emulate it, however. They were bearing swiftly down on the buoy, and as they neared it Robert put the little boat head on to the stream and brought her neatly alongside. Sally had already put the fender over, and now all hands grabbed the buoy, and in a moment they had made fast.

Shamefaced and much cast down the first mate then reviewed her sadly depleted stores.

'Sardine sandwiches,' she said, 'and Captain's Biscuits for pudding. Oh, dear, I *am* sorry.'

'Sorry,' echoed Mickie, waving a sardine aloft by its tail. 'Good old Sally! I haven't laughed so much for years, as when you dropped that tin.'

They all began to giggle again. Finally even Sally began to see the funny side of the disaster, and they settled down to their lunch with a relish.



CHAPTER 13

THE LORRIMERS WERE RECLINING in the bottom of their boat, and thinking how thirsty they were, when they heard a loud hail from the middle of the river.

'I say,' cried Sally, 'there's Jim!'

'Hooray! So it is!' exclaimed Robert. 'Hi! JIM!! Come and talk to us!'

Mickie and Jane had both turned bright scarlet at sight of the all-too-familiar boat, and they sat strangely still and silent as Jim veered over towards them, and shutting off his engine, came skilfully alongside.

'*Esmeralda* ahoy!' he said, 'you're a long way from home, aren't you?'

'Oh, we're not,' cried Sally, 'we've only just started. We're going simply miles!'

Mickie, meanwhile, screened by Jane's back, was making the most peculiar signs and faces at Jim, who quite failed to interpret them.

'Hullo, young feller-me-lad,' he grinned, 'what's up with you? Been jumping on any more buoys lately?'

'Oh ~~no~~ rather not,' said Mickie hastily, 'I say, Jim, isn't it a lovely day?'

But it was too late. Already Robert had pricked up his ears, and looking suspiciously from one scarlet-faced twin to the other, said grimly: 'What's all this about buoys, Mike?'

For a moment the twins floundered, and strove to fabricate probable stories.

'Seems to me I've put my foot in it proper,' said Jim, realising too late the lie of the land. And then, piece by piece, the whole story came out; but somehow it seemed so funny in the telling that even Mickie joined in the laughter against himself.

'Are you waiting for the tide?' asked Jim then, and Robert replied:

'Well, we are, sort of, but it's a long time to wait. You see we're bound for the Nore.'

'The N~~ORE~~!' Jim whistled in astonishment. 'Why, I've never been so far myself - but I must say you've got some spunk, and I envy you! Lovely weather and a tidy little boat, and plenty to eat too, I reckon.' He

laughed reminiscently, as he thought of the scrumptious lunch he had shared with them on their first meeting.

'Well, not exactly, because you see . . .' began Jane, but Sally frowned her into silence, 'for, somehow, such a revelation would have reflected on their family pride.

'How about a bit of a tow?' said the kindly policeman.

'Oh Jim!' they chorused, 'that would be grand! Where are you going?'

'Wapping. Half a shake and I'll fix you up with a tow rope.'

He tied a strong painter round the mast of the dinghy, and told them to sit as far aft as possible to prevent straining the planking as she was towed along.

'Where do you want to go to?' he cried, before slipping the engine into gear.

Robert thought for a moment, and then replied: 'Tower Bridge, please. We have some business to see to in the City.'

'Right you are,' laughed Jim, 'I'll put you down right by the Bank of England or the Stock Exchange. Just say the word!'

It was a couple of hours from Wandsworth before the romantic outline of the Tower of London came into view, but the time passed like a flash for the Lorrimers. There was so much to look at, such a

variety of incident in the river that teemed with life.

Level with the Tower Jim shut off his engine, and was preparing to cast them off, when Robert, going forward, cried: 'I say, Jim, are there any shops at Wapping?'

'Well, in a manner of speaking - not what some people might call stores, but everything a sailor needs, from slop-shops to pop-shops.

Robert flushed slightly at the mention of the last, and exchanged a meaning glance with Sally, who signalled back her silent agreement.

'Can we change our minds?' he asked then, 'and come all the way?'

'And the business in the City?' twinkled Jim.

'Oh, that can wait,' replied Robert, and on they went.

Jane was thrilled with the sight of the Tower. Of course she had been over it, but to arrive from an ordinary bus, in a school crocodile, clad in gloves and long stockings, is a very different matter from streaking by in your own boat, with dirty bare legs trailing in the water behind you.

'Look,' she cried, 'Traitors' Gate!' and refused to believe it when Robert said it was no such thing, but more probably a main drain outlet.

The Pool of London held a thousand enchantments, and Robert was secretly rather relieved that they were not under sail, for a press of traffic had come up on the

tide. So tiny a speck as *Esmeralda's* sail would have been almost invisible to the helmsmen of big steamers shut away in glass boxes high, high above the water.

'Gosh,' exclaimed Mickie, 'there's the Red Flag on that boat, hammer and sickle and all. Watch me give the clenched fist salute.'

His behaviour caused much amusement amongst the sailors, and consequent embarrassment to their elders.

'I say,' remonstrated Sally, 'do keep quiet.'

Robert growled: 'Remember you're English, can't you?'

'But Robert,' protested Jane, 'it's so lovely to feel all International. It's only doing what that funny old United Nations lecturer said we were to do, being friendly to foreigners.'

'Being friendly's quite a different thing from making fools of yourselves,' admonished Robert.

Jane, however, was by now far too excited with the varied scene to feel rebuked. Splashing her legs in the water, she cried:

'Look, look, there's a boat-load of blackamoors!'

Lascars, their faces dusky against the light-blue of their much-washed dungarees, swarmed like flies over a ship recently arrived from India, most of them painting and washing down the sides. Some paused in their painting and waved as the children went by.

They were soon passing the entrance to St. Katherine's Dock, and before long Jim gave the sign that he was

going to swing his boat across the river. He brought her alongside a floating pontoon with a gangway leading from it to the shore.

'Here you are,' he cried, 'Wapping Police Station. Anyone for the cells?'

The Lorrimers scrambled ashore, and making *Esmeralda* fast, followed Jim into the police station.

'I think,' said Robert, 'only two of us had better go, and the other two stop here. Would that be all right, Jim?'

'Certainly it is, if you behave yourselves,' said Jim, grinning.

When Jim was out of hearing, Jane, as the owner of the locket, was detailed to go with Robert to look for a pawn-shop, and the other two loaded them with instructions as to just what they were to buy, if a fair price was raised.

'Don't let it go under a fiver,' were Mickie's last words; 'then we can get me some real sea-boots, too.'

They wandered through narrow streets and passages shadowed by warehouses, picking their way through bunches of tough-looking stevedores. Jane was a little alarmed in case they should be bludgeoned, and the locket snatched from her neck before they even found a pawn-shop; but she need not have worried, for they looked a disreputable pair in their creased shorts and faded aertex shirts, and nobody would have guessed they had more than a halfpenny between them.

Following Jim's directions they came, at last, to a street of ramshackle shops, and over the door of one hung three golden balls as testimony of its trade. Robert felt a sudden embarrassment creep over him, and for a moment was tempted to call off the whole expedition and return to Victoria Road, rather than go with Jane into the sordid-looking shop.

'I say, Pug,' he laid a hand on her arm, 'you're sure you don't mind?

'Mind? Of course not!' she replied without hesitation, 'we have got to eat, and this is the Only Way.'

She was already grasping the door-handle, when Robert stopped her again, and said in a hesitating voice that she hardly recognised:

'Good girl. Best take it off before you go in. It'd look better.'

They went in, Jane leading the way. A figure bent double over a pile of rags unbent itself slightly and looked up. They found themselves looking at the oldest man they had ever seen. He had frail hands, and a long, dirty-looking beard; only his eyes were hard and dark, with an expression of permanent suspicion.

'Well?' he snapped, and Jane silently held out the locket. It was a lovely thing and shone pure and clean in the murkiness of the shop. The old man's eyes narrowed as he looked at it.

'Gold, eh?' he said. 'Did you come by it honest?

'Why, of course! It was given me at my christening!'

It was hard to tell whether the pawnbroker was more taken aback at the depth of indignation in her tones, or at the educated accent proceeding from so very dirty and dishevelled a small girl. He said nothing for a moment, but examined the locket more closely.

'What do you want for it?' he asked.

'Well, how much will you offer?' countered Robert, which Jane thought was quite the wrong thing to say. Had she been in charge of the expedition she would have said, boldly and without hesitation: 'Ten pounds.' She was beginning to realise that Robert, the salesman, was a very different person from Robert the purchaser.

'Fifteen bob,' said the old man briefly.

'Good gracious, NO!' exclaimed the owner of the locket, 'why it must be worth ten pounds at least.'

The man shrugged his shoulders, and flicked the locket contemptuously, so that it seemed to dwindle in size before their very eyes. Robert felt his embarrassment turn to anger, and longed to snatch the locket back again. They would find some other way of raising money, or, if necessary, they could do without food for a bit. Other people had, and it hadn't killed them.

'If that's all you have to offer we won't trouble you any further,' he said. His eyes held a glint of steel, and under their steady gaze the pawnbroker's lids flickered, and he snuffed unpleasantly.

'Well, well, I always give fair prices,' he muttered reluctantly. 'I'll say seventeen and sixpence. Not that it's worth it.'

'It's worth a jolly sight more and you know it. But we'll take thirty bob.'

'You're an optimist, you are,' and he laughed in a thin unmusical way that made Jane feel slightly sick.

'Well, there you are, thirty bob or nothing. And anyway, we're not selling it, we're only pawning it, and we'll be back to buy it off you again, plus whatever your beastly interest is, in a few days' time.'

The battle was won. The old man shambled behind the counter, and drawing the notes from the till handed them to Robert, together with a yellow ticket.

'Good afternoon,' said Robert, and turning on his heel, he placed a hand gently but firmly beneath Jane's elbow, and led her out.

'Oh,' she exclaimed as the door closed behind them, 'isn't it lovely to be in the fresh air again? What a horrid old man!'

'Um!' said Robert, but Jane continued, undiscouraged, 'and did you see all those other things - coats and hats and even shoes? Does that mean that people really do sell things like that? Oh, Robert, think how awful to have to go to that beastly old man and sell your clothes when you were really hungry. Not like us, I mean, but really not enough to eat.'

Jane's sensitive soul was rent by the visions she was conjuring up, and Robert saw he must do something to check the tears that were already brimming to her eyes.

'Come on, Pug-face. We must attend to the victualing now.'

Money goes a long way in dockland provision shops, and after the purchase of a supply of milk, eggs, butter, bread, corned-beef, bacon, oranges, sardines, and chocolate biscuits, the starboard watch was astonished and delighted to find 8s. 3½d. still remaining to them. Staggering under their load and feeling much pleased with themselves, they made their way back to the police station.

In the meantime, the port watch had not been idle. They had soon discovered that the *Gertie May* had been seen going down-river in the early morning, with Squinty frantically scrubbing at the insulting message on her side. This point satisfactorily settled, they proceeded, with Jim as guide, to explore every corner of the police station.

They peered, fascinated, into the cells, inspected minutely the stores of the canteen, and made new friends without number. Mickie was sadly disappointed to find no desperate criminal gnawing his fingers in a cell, but Jim made up for it by showing the various notices of 'Wanted' men.

There was one in particular, a striking photograph of a man with a dark, sullen face, and a deep scar run-

ning from brow to chin, that stirred Mickie's imagination.

'Look, Sally!' he exclaimed, 'Rory O'Moore!' What a grand name! What's he wanted for? "Member of the I.R.A." What's that, Jim?

'Irish Republican Army,' said Jim. 'He's a regular bad lot, that chap, and slippery as an eel. We don't know whether he's in England now or not.'

"Believed to have been concerned in armed raids in Belfast and ports in this country," read out Mickie with starting eyes. 'I say, this is something like!'

'Don't you go makin' a hero of him, me lad,' said Jim, unusually serious, 'he's scared and injured a lot o' folk that never did him no harm, and done his country more harm than good in the doing of it.'

This rather dashed the enthusiasm of Mickie, who had already pictured to himself a kind of modern Robert Bruce, taking his life in his hands, whilst he fought single-handed for his country.

The rest of the notices describing pick-pockets, petty thieves and articles lost or found, seemed tame, however, by comparison, and Sally was just beginning to wonder where the others had got to, when they burst in, laden with their spoils.

It was already after five, and the tide just on the turn, so the skipper ordered an immediate start. Jim insisted on their swallowing a hasty cup of tea and some thick bread and butter at the canteen, and then helped them load their stores. It did not take them long to

get ready for sea, and at half-past five they shoved off.

'Good-bye, good-bye!' they shouted, as the tide bore them swiftly away.

'Good-bye and good sailing!' cried Jim, 'bring us a souvenir from the Nore!'



CHAPTER 14

IT WAS A FAIR WIND, and the sun still shone, though woolly white clouds chased one another occasionally across the sky. Grimy-looking warehouses, separated every now and then by narrow streets, towered on either side of them now. They kept their precious chart spread out, tracing their course on it as they went along, looking for the entrances to various docks, and recognising existing places with such fascinating names as Execution Dock, Limehouse Cut, and the Isle of Dogs.

The broad sweep of Greenwich Reach, with Wren's magnificent building standing by the water-side in stately beauty, reduced them all to momentary silence.

The full glory and romance of their voyage came over them afresh, and they could hardly believe that the swift and ever-widening stream on which they sailed was really their own London River.

Towards seven o'clock, Mickie, as usual, began to clamour for food. The starboard watch was in charge, so he and Sally together prepared a tasty meal from the varied stores now at their disposal, and this vanished in record time.

Jane smothered a yawn, as she slowly drained an orange of its juice through a little hole she had made in the top.

'What time does the tide turn?' she asked.

'Somewhere around midnight. I'm not quite sure, because, of course, the lower down you get the earlier it turns, I suppose,' Robert replied. 'Why, are you sleepy?'

'No, of course not,' said Jane stoutly, tears rising to her eyes with the effort of subduing the yawns, which followed now in quick succession. Robert thought for a moment.

'Now look here,' he said at length, 'it's obvious we ought to go on sailing while the tide's with us, if we're going to keep on the tail of the *Gettie May*. Don't you agree?'

'Oh, rather!' came with unanimous voice from the crew.

'At the same time we're all pretty tired after last night, and we've got to get what sleep we can, so we'll

go on keeping our watches, only we'll make them two hours instead of one. Then the watch below can get some sleep. Actually, the light will be going about two hours from now, I suppose, so I think Pug and I had better go off watch, then I can take the helm when it's dark.'

'But I don't want to miss anything!' cried Jane.

'Don't be an owl!' said Mickie, 'we'll call you if there's anything exciting. There's nothing much to look at now.'

Robert went for'ard and delved into the locker. He pulled out all the sleeping-bags and folded two into pillows, which he placed one on either side of the centre-plate casing.

'Come on, Pug, bed-time.

'Oh, but my teeth!'

'Never mind your teeth for once

'Oh, but I should hate to go to bed without cleaning them. They'd wake up all furry.

'Humour her,' said Sally from the tiller, so Robert delved again until he found Jane's blue sponge-bag. Then, most methodically, she prepared herself for sleep.

Mickie shifted aft beside Sally, so that a good space was left for the sleepers. They settled down contentedly, and silence fell on the ship. Robert's breathing soon altered to a deep regular tempo, but Jane was longer going off. As usual, her imagination was hard at work, long after her tired body was ready for sleep.

Close to her ear she could hear the water rippling by, and each ripple seemed busy and urgent on its race to the sea. Above the narrowing peak of the sail she watched the sky, clear now of clouds and dimming from pale blue to a steely grey as night approached.

The evening star came into view, and within herself Jane chanted:

‘Star bright, star light, first star I see to-night.
I wish I may, I wish I might
Get the wish I wish to-night.’

Then shutting her eyes very tight and concentrating very hard she wished, ‘To see the Nore, to see the Nore, to see the Nore . . .’ And so sleep claimed her.

It seemed hardly a second to Robert before a hand touched his shoulder and Mickie’s voice, repulsively wakeful, sounded close in his ear, saying: ‘Two bells, sir, shall I call the watch?’

‘Yes,’ he grunted sleepily, and Mickie turned his attention to the Able Seamen.

‘Show a leg there, show a leg!’ he shouted, half-deafening her, and making her start up, wakeful now with alarm.

They changed positions, and Sally and Mickie clamoured into the already-warm sleeping-bags.

‘Sure you wouldn’t like to go on sleeping, Jane?’ asked Sally, ‘I could easily do another two hours.’

‘Of course not,’ cried Jane, forcing her heavy-lidded

eyes to open wider in an effort to appear wakeful and alert.

It was dark now, and the shadowy river bank appeared more like some distant coast line.

'It's not true,' thought Jane, 'it's a dream. We're Columbus, we're the *Mayflower*, we're every brave vessel that ever was, the *Golden Hind*, the *Flying Cloud* . . . we're . . .' and her head nodded drowsily. Robert noticing this, said:

'Lay your head on my shoulder, Pug, and count the stars.'

He put a kindly arm around her and she settled into the curve of his shoulder with a contented snuggle.

'One, two, three, four, five, six . . . seven . . .'
And then the ship was utterly still.

The wind was steady now, and broad on the beam. The jib sheets had been made fast by the port watch and needed no adjusting. The skipper eased the strain on the mainsheet by a half-turn round a cleat. All that was needed now was a light hand on the tiller to keep *Esmeralda* on her course.

The only conscious member of the crew, Robert, felt very much Master of his ship, and drew deep pleasure from the knowledge that his brother and sisters, sleeping so trustingly and peacefully, were completely in his charge. The heaviness of sleep fell from him, and his mind felt clear and strong. Just as Jane's imagination had played with all the great ships of the

past, so Robert's felt at that time all the nobility of great seamen, now dead and gone.

A sharp bend in the river at Greenhithe brought him back to reality again, and he was forced to shift Jane's weight from his shoulder while he altered the set of the sail; but she did not wake, and settled again like a sleeping puppy.

Approaching Gravesend, Robert felt a little anxiety, for a distant movement of red and green lights showed that there was shipping about; but steadying the tiller with his knee, he fished the torch from his pocket, where he had placed it ready for such a contingency, and from time to time flashed it, so that the whole measure of *Esmeralda's* mainsail shone white in the darkness.

He could feel the ebb slackening now, and planned to call 'all hands' to a general council at the next curve of the river, which he knew led into Lower Hope Reach.

'Given the tide,' he thought, 'I would sail on and on and on. There is nothing to stop us until we hit France (or is it Holland?) But still,' he said to himself, as a horrid thought struck him, 'how are we to know that the *Gertie May* hasn't anchored somewhere around here for the night? She wouldn't go over the tide, so she couldn't be far away.' No, there was obviously no point in going much farther that night.

'It is always a sorry business waking sleeping mariners, and Robert felt most brutal as he shook Jane back to consciousness; but she was soon alert and delighted at

the prospect of retaliating on Mickie for her own rude awakening. She slid along the thwart noiselessly, and trailing her fingers in the water, scattered a chilly spray over Mickie's face. It took more than this, however, to disturb a sleeper of so clear a conscience, so she cupped her hands and gave him a good dose of river-water.

'OUCH!' he cried, sitting up instantly, and the free fight that followed soon woke Sally.

'All hands on deck!' called Robert, and order was gradually restored.

At his request, Sally opened the chart, and Jane shone the lamp on it. They debated where to put in for the night, and finally decided to make for the northern bank, as the shores of Hole Haven had a safe, inviting sound.

Risking nothing, Robert ordered all sail to be lowered before they were in danger of hitting submerged rocks or stones, and under oars alone felt his way cautiously into a little creek. They soon found bottom, and tested it with the oar before jumping ashore, for fear it was a bottomless quick-sand that would swallow them for all eternity.

They had no knowledge of how far the tide might rise in the night, so decided to pitch a camp some distance up on a bank of turf that was, as Robert said, 'As dry as could be expected.'

The painter, after the *Gertie May* adventure, was not long enough to be of much service, so that Robert

unrove the mainsheet and, using a double length of this, tied it to the painter and then made it fast to a stake in the bank.

'First I'll get the Primus going,' he said. 'Then Sally and Jane can get some cocoa made, while Mickie and I set the tents. It's not going to rain, but I think we shall sleep longer under cover, and it's no good being up and about until the tide turns.'

As they sipped the brew, which was most sweet and comforting, they looked about them. The place had a desolate, dreary look, flat and bleak, with never a sign of habitation. It might have been uncanny and a little frightening, but that the friendly river flowed so near, and every so often the toot of a distant steamer told of seamen on their way to and from the sea.

'I say,' said Mickie presently, 'd'you think we'll ever find the *Gertie May*?'

'Oh, I think we shall, all right,' Robert said. 'Plenty of people must have seen her go by, specially if she's still got that writing on her!'

'Well, she has - at least she had when she passed Wapping. I bet Ben Skinner's livid!'

'Anyway,' broke in Sally suddenly, 'I don't care even if we do miss her, so long as we get to the Nore.'

'Nor do I!' echoed Jane. 'I want to see the Nore more than anything I've ever wanted!'

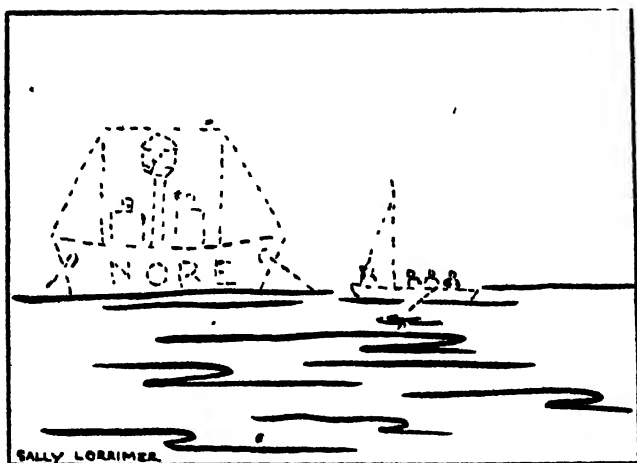
'You sausage!' said Mickie, assuming a contempt he did not feel. 'It's only an old lightship.'

'Sausage yourself,' returned Jane with spirit. 'I don't care whether it's old or new. It's the NORE, and it's our Goal, and you want to get there as much as I do.'

'Oh, for the love of Mike, you two, stow it,' exclaimed Robert, seeing the twins fairly launched on one of their famous arguments.

'But he said . . .' began Jane indignantly.

'Oh, all right, if you want to sit up yapping all night, go ahead. Personally I'm going to bed. Good night, all.'



CHAPTER 15

WHEN THE ALARM RANG Robert thought there *must* be some mistake. He must have set it wrong in the dark. Five hours could certainly not have passed like this—more likely five minutes. He pulled the clock from under his folded coat, and its round uncompromising face showed five o'clock in very truth. He realised then that it was already light, so of course there was no mistake.

He looked at Mickie, lying so pathetically snug and deep in sleep, and decided that they could easily spare another hour. Setting the clock for six, he was immediately asleep.

The extra hour made a great difference, and when

next the bell rang Robert was quickly awake, and ready to rise. Someone in the next tent had heard it too, for there was a sound of movement, and Sally's voice called out:

'Morning, all!'

Mickie, as usual, took a lot of waking, but eager now to make up for that lost hour, Robert stood no nonsense and fairly pummelled him into consciousness.

They kept to the same routine; the boys stowing the gear while the girls cooked the breakfast. To-day they prepared a wonderful confection of scrambled eggs and bully beef, and this proved so popular that the plates needed the merest dabble in the river to get them clean before they were packed away.

It was a grey day, and yet warm and muggy.

'You can't see far this morning, can you?' said Jane, screwing up her face; 'Or is it just our sleepy eyes?'

'No, the visibility isn't up to much, but I expect it'll clear when the sun gets stronger,' the skipper said.

Sally looked meditatively at the sky.

'Dunno about the sun,' she said. 'Looks to me more like rain. Pack the ilskins somewhere get-at-able, Mickie.'

'O.K.,' came the smothered reply from the second mate, who was upside-down stowing gear in the little locker.

They pushed off at about 6.45, and hoisted sail as they drifted swiftly down-stream in the grip of the

tide. The wind was fluky and needed careful handling, but the Lorrimers were becoming skilled now in river lore, and knew just when and where to look for sudden gusts.

Considering the small amount of sleep they had had, the crew were in fine fettle, and led by Robert's rather unreliable voice sang every song they knew that had the remotest nautical flavour.

Suddenly Jane, 'who was lying on the fore-deck watching the bow wave and trailing her hand in the water, gave a little shriek.

'It's the sea! I do believe it's the sea!'

'What's the sea?' asked Mickie, breaking off in the middle of a poignant rendering of 'Shenandoah.'

'The water, stupid, of course. Taste it - it's all salty.'

The others quickly dipped their fingers into the water and sampled the taste.'

'You're right, Pug; we can't be far from the sea now,' said Robert. 'After all this bit is called "Sea Reach".'

'So we jolly well ought to reach the sea,' said Mickie.

'Ha! Ha! Ha!' chanted his unappreciative elders mirthlessly. 'Must have his little joke!'

'Bet you I see the Nore first,' he said, unabashed.

'Bet you don't!' cried Jane.

'What do you bet? I bet my blue fountain-pen without a cap.'

'I bet my mother-of-pearl knife.'

'Pouff, I don't want that cissy thing! Why, it's got a button-hook!'

'Stow it, you two,' Robert chipped in. 'Sally will probably see it first, anyway. That old oculist fellow we all went to said she had terrifically long sight.'

'It's not much good to me now,' said the owner of the long-distance eyes. 'I can hardly see the other bank.'

'Yes, this mist's beastly. If it doesn't clear up soon we'll have to go back.'

'Oh, Robert, we *couldn't*!' was the immediate wailing reply of the crew to this. 'We've *got* to round the Nore, now we've come so far.'

'And we've absolutely *got* to find out what the *Gertie May's* up to before Friday,' added Mickie doggedly.

'All right, all right,' said Robert, slightly irked, for nobody wanted to reach the Nore more than he did, and it was so much more difficult for him, since he had his sense of responsibility to contend with. 'Anyway, we must get the best out of *Esmeralda*, while we can. Come in off the fore-deck, Jane. We can't sail well with so much weight forrard.'

Jane came inboard obediently, and once more the family united in sailing *Esmeralda* as efficiently as if she were a 12-metre, with every man at his action station, ready to jump to the word of command. For some time they raced against invisible opponents, intent only on perfecting each corporate movement;

so intent, indeed, that when they tired of this and looked about them, they were amazed to find that the river banks had faded entirely from view.

Robert opened up the chart.

'We've got Southend-on-Sea on the port bow, and the Isle of Grain to starboard; but bless me if I can see either. Can you, Sally?'

Sally peered out through the grey mist that fringed the edge of the water.

'Well, there's a black shape ahead that might be Southend Pier. Wait a minute, though! It's moving! Glory, it's coming this way! It's a ship!'

From the distance now came a long, moaning roar.

'Fog-horn,' cried Mickie, excitedly. 'How absolutely wizard!'

Robert's face did not register quite the same sentiments.

'Now, listen, all of you,' he said slowly. 'This may be pretty serious, and we've got to be prepared. If I hadn't been a complete fool there'd be nothing to worry about much.'

'Why are you a fool?' asked Sally.

'Compass. I forgot all about that. No one but a fool would go to sea without a compass.'

Jane, seeing her brother's worried face, thought hard for some solution.

'I know, we learnt a way at Guides of doing without a compass. Wait a moment, while I think. You point the hour-hand of your watch at the sun . . .'

'Gosh, Pug, sometimes I think you're wanting!'

Jane turned pained and surprised eyes on her twin.
'But, Mickie, why?'

'Well, where's the sun, you chump?'

'OH!'

Robert, meanwhile, had handed the tiller to Sally, and was deep in the chart. At length he gave judgment.

'We can't sail back, because the tide's against us. We can't anchor in mid-stream because we might get run down, and anyway, we haven't a long enough cable. And I don't like the look of either coast-line at all. Here it marks submerged stumps, and here rocks and boulders. Odds are if we tried to run in-shore we might hit something, and with a hole in *Esmeralda's* bottom, where should we be? Strikes me, our only plan is to stow the sails - there's not enough wind to bother about, anyway - and drift down on the tide. It'll be turning about lunch-time, and with any luck should bring us back again. We'll keep the oars handy to give us steerage way in case anything crops up. What do you say to that, chaps?'

'Seems the best we can do,' replied Sally. 'First I think we'd better put on oilies. This fog's getting thicker, and it's rather damp. Remember old James saying: "The way to keep warm is niver to git cold, and the way to keep dry is niver to git wet"?''

Mickie sorted the oilskins and handed them out to their various owners. There was a certain excitement

about scrambling into these. The sea was wrapped in their sticky folds. The feel of them, stiff and unyielding, reminded the children forcibly of wet afternoons mackerel-fishing, when the soft West Country rain drifted across the sea, slipping in shining runnels down the black oilskins, and washing away the fish-scales which lay like confetti on the thwarts and sides of Jarvis's motor-boat.

Sally found a spinner and a small length of line in one of her pockets.

'Well, if we're lost in the fog for weeks, at any rate we shall be able to catch fish,' she said cheerfully.

Robert decided to stand by the oars, and sent Sally forrard as look-out. Jane he put at the helm, an office that made her serenely happy, since she did not realise that *Esmeralda* was now going so slowly that she had no steerage way. He then instructed Mickie to make a fog-alarm out of a biscuit-tin, and to bang on this at intervals with a large iron spoon.

The fog, now dense and chill, drew closer about them, and *Esmeralda*, floating silently on the tide, was encased in a dim, uncanny world of her own. All the children felt an unconfessed feeling of fear and foreboding.

'Bang - bang - bang,' came the clash of Mickie's gong, and doubting its carrying powers, he augmented it with strange, fearful yowls, produced, no one knew how, by his long-suffering vocal cords.

There was nothing to mark their progress, but

Robert knew they were slipping forward at a steady three knots. He could taste the tang of the sea now, as he licked his lips, and over and over in his mind was saying: 'If only I had a compass, if only I had a compass.'

There was a strange mixture of silence and noise. At regular intervals came the dull, powerful roar of the Nore lightship, then perhaps the sharp double toot of some merchantman turning to port, followed by a silence into which crept the mournful 'ding-dong - ding-dong' of a ship at anchor.

'Something coming up forward,' shouted the lookout, and Mickie redoubled his efforts with the biscuit-tin. Jane gripped the tiller as if on her alone depended the safety of the ship, and Robert glanced anxiously over his shoulder. A dim shape came into sight, but still seemed too far away to matter. They strained their eyes to see which way she would turn. Then — Oooh! The Lorrimer's hearts turned over. The ship was right upon them. Robert bent to the oars and with great swinging strokes drove *Esmeralda* through the water, away from the monstrous looming shadow. A whisper of wind, the fog stirred for a moment, and a black mass slipped by them, only a few feet away. They never knew if any one aboard the steamer had seen them; and in another second she was gone, swallowed in an impenetrable wall of mist.

'Gosh!' said Mickie.

The noises about them now seemed louder and

more menacing. Only the steady notes of the anchored lightship gave some comfort, for here at least was one thing that would not bear down suddenly upon them. Then Robert had an idea.

'D'you hear, the Nore?'

'Yes,' they all replied.

'Well, shut your eyes, listen carefully, and point which way you think the sound comes from.'

They obeyed, but at first the result was disappointing, for each seemed to hear it coming from an entirely different quarter.

'Try again,' said Robert, 'and take more time.'

There was a long interval of fervent concentration, and when Robert cried 'Now!' three fingers shot out, and pointed in more or less the same direction.

'All right,' cried Robert, bending to the oars once more.

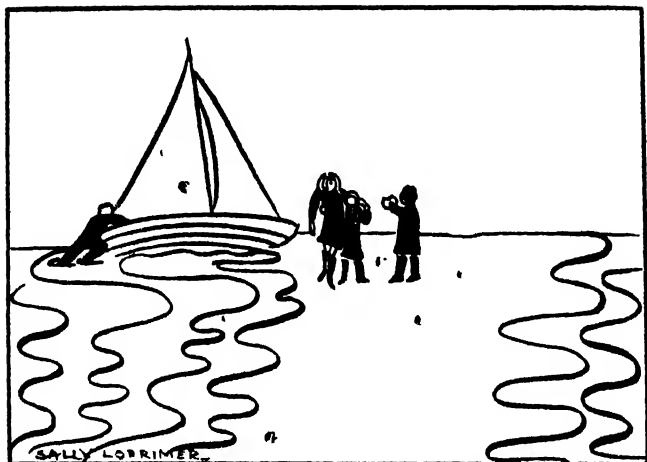
They progressed erratically. For a time Robert would row like one possessed, then pause. They would listen, eyes shut tight, and swiftly point. One thing was certain, they were going in the right direction, for every time they stopped the roar was louder than before. The sound then grew almost deafening, and the children could not understand why the lightship was not in sight.

Breathless and tired, Robert hung for a moment over his oars, then started suddenly, crying 'Here she is!' Suddenly, as if a magic hand had waved, where nothing had been a moment before, a large red-painted

vessel took shape in the wreathing mist. Huge white letters were painted on her side and they spelled them out together, in frantic exultation:

‘N – O – R – E! – NORE!’

No explorers, reaching their goal after weeks of hunger and privation, ever felt a greater thrill than did the Lorrimers at that moment.



CHAPTER 16

'SHALL WE ANCHOR?' asked Mickie, moving forward busily.

'If you'd only listen sometimes to other people, you'd have heard me say once already that we can't anchor in mid-ocean. What good would three and three-quarter yards of string be to hold on to? Don't be a half-wit, Mike.'

'There's no sign of anyone about,' said Sally.

'I don't suppose it would matter if we tied up to one of their mooring-cables.'

Snugly moored, Robert felt as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. They might grow cold and hungry here, but at least no major disaster

could overtake them. Breakfast seemed a long way off, and he was glad to see Sally busying herself in the locker.

'Do you think it's safe to light the Primus?' she called over her shoulder.

Robert considered the problem, and Mickie and Jane, longing for a hot, reviving drink, hung on his words; but he shook his head reluctantly and said:

'Honestly, I don't think it really is safe. We *could* throw it overboard if it blew up, but then where would we be for hot food for the rest of the way?—Anyway we might burn ourselves, and that wouldn't be much fun, miles away from land.'

Jane was deeply disappointed, and did not entirely dismiss the thought of hot food from her mind. However, she covered her disappointment with good grace. Only, munching away contentedly enough to outward seeming at tinned beef and chunks of bread, in the secret recesses of her mind she planned hot, steaming, savoury menus.

Sally, meanwhile, using the fore-deck as a kitchen table, was busy preparing a pudding.

'Here you are,' she said at length, holding out a wonderful chocolate confection that would not have disgraced a French patisserie. 'Gâteau Nore—who wants some?'

'Me! Me!' they cried. 'How did you make it, Sally?'

'Oh,' laughed the cook, 'it's an old, old recipe handed down from mermaid to mermaid.'

'Quit kidding,' cried Robert. 'It really is good, and if it's as easy as that to make, I could make it for the fellows at school in my study.'

'It's only layers of biscuits covered with cocoa, mixed thick with sugar and a spot of condensed milk, and then grated chocolate on the top.'

'Scrumptious!' was Mickie's comment. 'Any second helps?'

'Not this time, nie boy. We're only half-way round the world, remember.'

The children licked their fingers and lay in the bottom of the boat, peering into the fog. They had grown accustomed to the regular roar of the fog-horn now, and no longer jumped each time it gave tongue.

'Does anyone live here?' Mickie asked.

'Rather,' said Robert. 'Severn, I believe, but I expect they're all keeping snug below.'

After a while time began to hang a little heavy, for there was absolutely nothing to look at. They played all their favourite railway journey games: 'I sent my ship to China' and 'Mrs. MacKenzie's Cat's Dead,' and many more – but these soon palled. For one thing Jane always won. Though seemingly slow in the up-take her gift of concentration was undefeatable.

'Let's sing again,' said Mickie at last, and with lugubrious fervour struck up 'Eternal Father, Strong to Save.'

It was a satisfying hymn for this kind of day, and

the Lorrimers attacked it with a will. They forgot the fog, forgot the cold, and sang the first verse over and over again, as they did not know the other words. For a third time they were droning:

‘Oh, hear us when we cry to Thee,
For those in peril on the sea.’

when a voice behind them called: ‘Ahoy there!’ making them leap in the air.

A gloomy-looking individual hung over the stern of the lightship.

‘What’s this? Carol-singers, or the Salvation Army?’ he said.

His face was so solemn, and his toneless voice so serious, that the Lorrimers thought he was the funniest thing they had ever seen, and rocked with laughter. He was not a bit annoyed, but took it rather as a tribute to his humour. In the same voice he asked:

‘Warm enough for you?’

‘Well, it is a bit cold for August, isn’t it?’ said Jane chattily.

‘Do you think this fog will last long?’ asked Robert.

‘Till exactly ‘alf-past twelve.’

‘I say, are you joking?’

‘Never more serious. You gits to know a bit about wind and weather when there’s nothing else to look at, and sure as fishes swim we’ll get a westerly wind, and a strong one at that, any moment now. I can smell

it coming. That'll push the fog away, and then the rain will come and polish things up a bit.'

'It sounds like magic to me,' exclaimed Sally.

'I suppose we couldn't come on board till then?' asked Jane, emboldened by a vision of a snug cabin and perhaps a warm fire.

'Sorry, missy, no followers allowed 'ere, as you might say. 'Sides, me mates are sleeping, and they might swear somethink 'orrible if they was woke up.'

'I suppose you haven't any hot water to spare?' pursued Jane.

'Ah, that's different. 'Ow about a nice cup o' tea? Kettle's just comin' to the boil.'

'Can you really spare it?'

'Goodness, yes. Got cups?'

Seeing Jane nod, he stumped off and vanished below.

'We've got sugar and milk, too!' she called after him.

As soon as he was out of sight, the two elders set on Jane.

'How *could* you, Jane?'

'Really, Pug, you are the giddy limit, cadging like that.'

But Mickie came swiftly to the defence of his twin, as he always did if she was attacked by anyone but himself.

'Well, anyway, you know you'll be jolly glad of a hot drink yourselves. I think it was jolly sensible of old Pug-face to speak up.'

The lightship man came back presently, bearing a large, battered enamel tea-pot. It was rather a complicated proceeding filling the mugs, for Jane had to stand on the fore-deck of the rocking boat and hold each mug in turn, high above her head, while he filled it gingerly with steaming liquid. They managed it between them without much spilling, however, and the crew of *Esmeralda* settled happily back to drink, warming their fingers on their mugs.

Their new friend was evidently disposed to chat, for he now put down the tea-pot and leaned confidentially on the rail.

'Ow'd you like my job, eh?'

'Well, I don't know,' said Robert, uncertain what answer was expected. 'I should think it's a bit, well - monotonous, isn't it?'

'Lots of folks thinks that. "Am't it dull out 'ere," they says, "all that way from land?" "Why, no," I says, "not reely dull, it ain't - never dull, in fact," I says. There's always ships around. An' I likes ships, darned sight more than I likes people. "Why, you never knows wot you'll see," I says. "Maybe a square-rigger home from the Gram Race, maybe a liner, maybe them racin' boats." Not but what I'd say that as good a surprise as I've ever 'ad was finding a thimble-full of sprats 'ung up on our mooring-cable.'

The Lorriners were so taken with this philosophical being that they did not even resent such description of themselves and their noble craft.

'Anyway,' he continued, 'where 'ave you come from?'

Encouraged by his friendly grunts, they told him a great deal of their own and *Esmeralda's* history, omitting only those facts that were detrimental to themselves, or too private to be disclosed; and, by some mute agreement, making no mention of their various passages with the *Gertie May*. Only, as they finished, Robert said tentatively: 'I suppose you haven't seen anything of a tug called the *Gertie May*?'

'*Gertie May*?' repeated the lightship-keeper, scratching his stubbly chin, '*Gertie May*? Let's see now — Yus, only this mornin' it was, I spied 'er makin' into the Medway, afore the fog come down. Like as not she's pickin' up a string of lighters at Rochester, and 'll be takin' 'em away up-river with the tide.'

As one man the Lorriners suffered. In the excitements of the fog and the arrival at the Nore they had almost forgotten the *Gertie May*. Could it be that she had eluded them after all? Robert looked at his watch, and Sally peered into the fog, which as yet showed no signs of lifting.

'Where'll she be going, do you suppose?'

'Couldn't say, mate — depends wot's she carryin'. Pal of yours on board?'

'Well, no, not exactly — we just know about her. Will, it soon be clearing, do you think?'

'No, missy, the fog'll not be liftin' yet awhile. 'Twon't be long, though. Smell the wind — there's a

touch of west in it. It'll be backin' wi' the turn o' the tide.'

A tortured interval followed. They tried to listen to his rambling stories with some semblance of interest, but all the time their minds were saying over and over:

'We'll never catch her now, we'll never catch her now!'

Jane was white round the mouth with the effort of willing the fog to lift, for now that they had reached the Nore all her powers of concentration were transferring themselves to the *Gertie May*. Robert quietly and methodically set everything in order so that an immediate start might be made at the first clearing, but intent as he was on solving the mystery of the *Gertie May*, he was not going to commit his ship to sea under dangerous conditions.

Twenty minutes went by, and then the fog, stirred now by the increasing force of the wind, drifted and shifted, showing here and there a sight of land, or of some passing vessel.

'You really do think the fog's going, and won't come back?' Robert asked.

'Oh, it'll come back all right.' Then seeing Robert's face cloud with anxiety, the men added kindly. 'But not to-day, nor to-morrow, ne'er, but it'll be back one day all right.'

'Come on, then,' said Robert. 'We must be off.'

'In a bit of a 'urry, aren't you? Where are you for? France?'

'No, we're going back where we came from, but we're in a hurry all right.'

They made their farewells, and Jane made him write his name and address on a bit of paper that she might knit him a scarf for Christmas. There was not much strength to the tide yet, but a fair weight of wind ruffled the surface of the water, and sent the remnants of fog scudding out to sea. The visibility was still very poor, and a depressing drizzle did little to improve matters, however, the dim outline of the coast was sufficient for them to steer by.

Robert eyed the weather keenly. 'Listen, you chaps, I've got an idea this is going to be no picnic. The wind's heading us, and it's getting stronger. We'll keep to our proper watches, and the watch below must stay below and keep dry.'

'But, Robert,' interposed Jane. 'How can we go below? We'd be in the river - I mean the sea.'

'Don't be such an owl, and use your imagination. You know I mean keep as dry as you can in the bottom of the boat. Anyway, you and I are on watch now, so button up your oilskin well and get hold of the jib-sheets.'

The water, which so short a while before had looked oily smooth and lifeless in the vapoury air, was now broken and rough as gathering wind met rising tide. Quite large waves lashed at *Esmeralda's* bow, and

every now and then a particularly violent one sent a shower of water over Mickie and Sally, huddled by the mast.

'I say,' said Sally, 'it's all very well being the watch below, but do we have to stay here if it gets much worse?'

'Yes,' said Robert grimly, 'you do. Four on deck's too many when we're going about as often as this.'

It was certainly hard work for the starboard watch, for the wind was dead ahead. To and fro across the river they raced, like a caged animal seeking a way of escape. Robert, silent and determined, sought by every cunning wile to steal some advantage from the dis-obliging wind. Jane, her hands already sore and tender with constant handling of the jib-sheets, urged the Able Seamen on to greater deeds of endurance and strength with strange oaths and cries.

It was rather miserable for the watch below to see so much happy activity in which they could play no part. They drooped, already cold and distinctly wet, longing for their turn to come, all too aware of what the other two had no time to observe – the fact that *Esmeralda* was making small headway over the land. It seemed as though the tide, which should by now have been strongly in their favour, was arrested in its advance, even as they were, by the west wind.

Sally took a mark on the land, and watched it intently. Slap, slash, slosh! went the waves against *Esmeralda's* sides, and up and down she bobbed. Up

and down – up and down – until Sally thought some strange miracle had occurred, holding the boat still while the coast of Kent rose and fell, rose and fell. The effort of watching set a tight band about her head. She felt suddenly no longer envious of Robert at the helm, but tired and heavy. She remembered the Gâteau Nore, and how messy the chocolate mixture had looked in the cup, and the thick cloying taste of condensed milk. Condensed milk! It seemed there was nothing else in her head – it was all she could remember. She tried to force her mind into a new channel, but stubborn and independent it returned to the thick, cloying taste of condensed milk. Somebody spoke to her, but their voice was far, far away, and she did not care what they said. They said it again, and this time very loud in her ear. It was Mickie, and he was saying: ‘Sally, what’s up, what’s the matter? You do look queer.’

‘Shut up,’ she replied desperately, ‘and leave me alone, DO.’

There was a silence, and into the silence came again the remembrance of the thick, cloying taste of condensed milk.

‘Look out,’ she mumbled, rocking the boat as she rose to her feet and scrambled frantically to the lee side.

Tactfully the others looked away, as Sally was swiftly and mercifully sick.

‘You’ll be better now,’ said Robert kindly, as she

settled again in the bottom of the boat. But she doubted it. She felt quite sure she would never be the same again – never know what it was to be without this constriction high on her chest, this knowledge that at any moment she might be sick again.

Suddenly she could bear it no longer. Something snapped in her brain, and in a voice that held tears and desperation, she wailed:

‘Oh, Robert – do something – stop it – stop this awful rocking!’

Robert was sympathetic. He had seen a sea-sick Sally before, but he himself had never been sick, so he could not gauge her suffering.

‘Take a pull, old girl, you know there’s nothing I can do.’

‘I want to get out. I can’t bear this. Robert, really I can’t. Put me ashore anywhere, and leave me!’

Robert looked about him. They were more or less in mid-stream, and a good two miles from land on either side. He had always heard you must be firm with sea-sick cases, but poor old Sally certainly did look a bit of a mess, her face the colour of Gruyère cheese, and her eyes sunk in mournful cavities. All at once he spied what looked like a mirage, on the star-board hand – a great, long sand-bank. He bore away, heading for this. It was obvious with the rising tide that they could not get stuck on the banks, and a temporary respite on dry land might be all that was needed to set Sally right.

'Goodness,' said Jane, 'I never noticed that was sand. I thought it was all sea.'

'So it will be soon,' replied Robert. 'It's the Maplin Sands. You can walk miles and miles on 'em at spring tides.'

Sally lay in the bottom of the boat, white and silent now. She did not even stir as *Esmeralda* bumped through the shallowing water, hitting bottom between each wave.

'Up centre-plate!' cried Robert, and they sailed on another twenty yards before coming finally to rest on the sand. Jane and Mickie jumped out and Robert touched Sally on the shoulder saying gently: 'Come on, Mister, here's that land you were wanting.'

She made no response and did not even open her eyes, so that Robert sensibly realised that a firm hand was now needed.

'Pull yourself together, Sally Lorrimer, and get out this instant.'

This had effect. Sally stirred herself and got clumsily out of the boat. She felt the lovely, steady ground beneath her feet and opened her eyes.

'Go on, Jane,' said Robert. 'Walk her up and down, and we'll have a captain's biscuit all round.'

The colour soon returned to Sally's cheeks, and she felt now a rising shame at her collapse. This made her apologetic and yet defiant.

Averting her eyes from their kind, solicitous looks, she cried:

'Why must it always be *me* that's sick! We eat the same things, we do the same things, but it's only *me* that's sick! It isn't fair.'

'It's tough luck, Mister, but remember Nelson,' said the skipper, and Sally was filled with remorse.

'The *Gertie May*!' she cried. 'Come on, we must go. Never mind about me. I'll be all right now, I won't do it again, I promise.' The others, who had been too tactful to mention their quarry, were delighted at Sally's speedy and unaccountable recovery.

Robert managed to whisper in Jane's ear: 'We'll let Sally and Mike take over now.'

Jane suppressed her disappointment. She had been living for the moment when she would take over the helm, and steady *Esmeralda* against the battering waves. Sally, however, now restored and munching captain's biscuits, saw through the ruse when the helm was offered her.

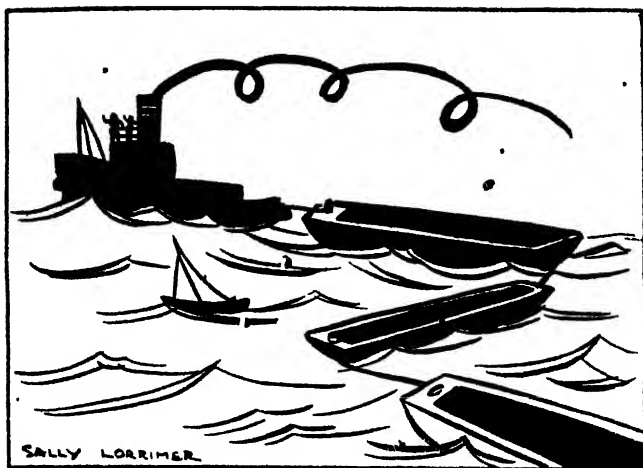
'No,' she said; 'Jane must have her trick – but I don't think I'll go below if you don't mind.'

'Take the jib-sheets, then,' said Robert, 'and I'll take the mainsheet. You'd find it a bit of a pull, Pug. Mickie, you keep a good look-out forward for stumps. If we hit anything here, with the tide rising, we should be done for.'

'I'll keep a watch for the *Gertie May*, too,' replied Mickie. 'We'd look pretty silly if we were so busy sailing we went right by her without noticing.'

'Well, I don't think she's come back yet,' said

Robert. 'Unless she's snooped up-river in the fog, she ought to be overtaking us any time now, so the farther we get this afternoon the better. Come on, chaps, away we go!'



CHAPTER 17

WITH EACH MAN WORKING at his appointed task, *Esmeralda* put to sea again. Steadily and strong blew the wind, and full in their faces. Pinching her all she could, Jane set *Esmeralda* into the teeth of it, so that she heeled over and water lapped the lee combing. Tremors of apprehension ran down Jane's spine lest a sudden gust should come and the boat be utterly swamped; but Robert kept a canny eye on the water, watching for each gust and occasionally, by a deft touch on the tiller, indicating to Jane just how far to luff.

Time sped by, but not so the coast. Their progress over the land was snail-like, yet they must have travelled miles and miles in their zigzag course.

Robert decided that as the stop on the Maplins had

deranged their programme, it would be best not to change the watch until four o'clock. Any other time Jane might have welcomed these extra minutes at the helm, but to-day her shoulders ached with the pull of the tiller, and when four o'clock came she relinquished it almost gratefully.

They were abreast of Canvey Island by now, and Sally felt with a sigh of relief that the sea was really and truly behind them. Stumps and sand-banks were also things of the past, and Mickie, lounging at the foot of the mast, let his gaze roam idly from side to side. Vessels of various kinds overtook them at intervals, ploughing on up the river. Twice Mickie stiffened as a tug came up, but each time it proved to be a strange one, and he sank back disappointed.

All at once, however, just as they went about, there came a shout: 'LOOK!'

All eyes turned swiftly down-river, and there butting through the waves, with a string of barges behind her, came the black and dingy form of the *Gertie May*.

'Look out,' said Robert sharply. 'Keep well clear of her, Sally, or I bet they'll try some dirty trick on us. They must have guessed it was us did the painting.'

They all stared with interest at her side as she came nearer, but their carefully inscribed insult had been hidden by means of long smears of black paint. They soon made out the form of Ben Skinner at the helm, and before his family could stop him, Mickie raised his voice in a piercing yell.

'Howdy, Ben Skinner, how's your steering to-day?'

His voice carried clear on the wind. The tug-master turned his head, and as he saw the little sailing-boat he let out a roar of rage.

'You young . . .!' he bellowed, shaking his fist at them. 'You wait till I get me 'ands on yer!'

'Come on, then,' shouted Mickie. 'We're all here!'

'Oh, Mickie, do be careful,' implored Jane. 'He probably *will* come!'

'Nerts!' said Mickie, making a face as the tug drew level. 'He couldn't do anything to us in broad daylight.'

At this moment the lank form of Squinty appeared beside his father. He took one look at *Esmeralda*, then the horrified Jane saw him clutch Ben Skinner's arm and wrench the wheel round. Fetching his son a mighty clout on the side of the head, Skinner straightened up again, but a part at least of Squinty's purpose was accomplished, for the tug had taken a mighty swerve, followed by her six barges. The swirling eddies they made caught *Esmeralda* broad on the beam and came near to swamping her. For one hideous moment water poured in over the gunwale, and Robert, knocking Sally out of the way, thrust the tiller hard down. The little boat seemed to hesitate for a moment, suspended at that fearful angle. Then with a shudder she righted herself, and swung back to an even keel, still rocking wildly in the churning waters.

A yell of derisive laughter was wafted back to them

from the *Gertie May*, but Robert, white and silent, paid little heed. Mickie, however, hardly grasping the real danger into which Squinty's reckless action had put them, was conscious only that his enemy had scored again.

'The lousy, mud-eating pestiferous brutes!' he muttered between clenched teeth. 'I'll pay them out. Robert! We've got to find out what they're up to Friday night, if they kill us. It must be something shady, and we'll see them in jug yet!'

'Yes,' said Robert grimly, 'I think we will. Sorry I was rough, old thing,' he added, as he handed the tiller once more to Sally.

'Don't be an ass,' she said. 'You were only just in time.'

They sailed on in silence. It was raining steadily now, a light but incessant drizzle, and had it not been for oilskins, sou'-westers and top-boots, the children would soon have been in a very sorry way. As it was, though definitely uncomfortable, nobody was really wet; only their fingers, sodden and unprotected, puckered like those of washerwomen.

'We're not doing much good,' said Robert at last. 'But if we can only weather Lower Hope Reach, the river curves there, and it'll be a beam wind. We must make Gravesend to-night, or we'll never catch up with the *Gertie May*.'

It was hours later before the skipper was finally forced to admit defeat. There were others in his crew

who would have given up the struggle long before, tired as they were of wind and rain, and the flap of jib-sheets, and the constant shifting from thwart to thwart.

While the tide was with them, however, Robert was adamant. They rounded the long bend into Lower Hope, but found little improvement in the direction of the wind, which seemed perversely to follow the course of the river, heading them all the way. At last the tide began to slacken, and Robert, gauging with desperate eyes the insignificant distance they had travelled in the last half-hour, realised that it was useless to struggle on.

'We've lost the tide now. We've not a hope.'

He sounded so dejected that the others hastened to comfort him.

'Anyway, Robert, it's only Wednesday.'

'And you know they said whatever was going to happen, wasn't going to happen till Friday.'

'I know,' he said; 'but suppose we have head winds all the way, and she's going right on up the river!'

Mickie suddenly began to giggle.

'What is it?' they asked.

'Don't you see how funny it would be, if, after we had traped all the way down here, we ran her to earth again, back at Port Lorrimer?'

There certainly was a funny side to this, and it did much to lighten their spirits.

'Where shall we sleep to-night, Robert?' asked Sally presently.

'That's just it. Tents aren't going to be much use in this weather. I wish we could find some shelter.'

'Anyway, do let's sleep that side to-night,' cried Jane, pointing.

'Why that side?'

'Don't you see, then to-night we shall sleep in Kent, yesterday we slept in Essex, the night before in Middlesex, so heaven knows where we'll sleep to-morrow.'

'There's something in that, Pug,' said Robert, manfully banishing his depression. 'We'll take a leg across the river and see if we can find anywhere to land.'

They crept across to the Kent coast, losing in the tide all they had gained on the previous tack. The shore appeared sandy and reasonably safe, and they hauled *Esmeralda* well up, and secured her to a stump with the doubled mainsheet. Then, while the port watch tidied her up for the night, the skipper and the Able Seamen plodded off in their heavy boots in search of shelter.

They found it sooner than they expected, in the form of a derelict barn. And before long, the whole crew was comfortably established, the Primus going, and a hot meal in course of preparation.

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They woke next day to find brilliant sunshine streaming in through the cracks in the roof. Tired as

they were after the struggle up from the Nore, following on their early start the previous morning, they had all overslept, and it was past ten o'clock by the time they had finished breakfast.

'We'll have to wait for the tide, anyway,' said Robert, trying not to wonder where the *Gertie May* had got to, 'so we might as well get our sails and things dry, and give the bedding an airing.'

'Food's running pretty low, too,' said Sally. 'Let's take a look on the chart and see if there's a village anywhere near.'

A collection of tiny black squares was discovered on the chart, which seemed to indicate some sort of human habitation.

Sally and Jane stumped off in the most promising direction, their sea-boots squelching in the grass, sodden still with yesterday's downpour.

They returned after some time, jubilantly carrying bread, butter, milk, eggs, and two ounces of bull's-eyes, to find the boys looking strangely clean and glowing, despite their crumpled clothes.

• 'Hullo,' they said. 'We've had a wizard bathe.'

'Ugh! Rather you than me!' cried Sally. 'It must have been icy.'

'A bit parky, p'raps,' admitted Robert. 'Incidentally, you two, how much money have you spent?'

'Well,' said Sally, 'there's only four shillings left – but just look what a lot we've bought.'

The tide was still ebbing, and the breeze now so

negligible, that there was obviously no point in setting sail again before slack water. It was really very pleasant, however, to be on shore, and able to stretch their legs, and with leap-frog, haudicap races, and an attempt to teach Jane to walk on her hands, the time passed quite merrily.

Not so the long beat up-river. With the turn of the tide the wind died almost completely, and the sun disappeared behind a bank of muddy clouds. They had thought to speed up the next reaches, and were bitterly disappointed at their slow progress. Robert, though he said nothing, gradually gave up all hope of catching the *Gertie May* in time.

There is nothing that needs more skill, or more constant attention, than a beat into a light head wind, and the luff of the mainsail seemed to flap continuously as one helmsman after another forgot to concentrate. Only the skipper never wavered, and gradually irritated his crew more and more by his constant rebukes and reminders. One by one their tempers and even their sense of humour went, and when the tide turned against them once more before they were into Gallion's Reach, a silence of despair settled on the ship.

'We'll never make it now,' said Robert gloomily. 'We might as well give up and anchor.'

'No, we won't,' said the Able Seamen, rallying suddenly and unexpectedly. 'We're not going backwards, anyway, so let's go on till it's dark.'

The skipper brightened and threw her a grateful look. .

'All right then,' he said. 'Come on, chaps, we'll get to Woolwich before midnight, if we have to row all the way.'

And so they did. They never quite knew how it was done, but as dusk faded into darkness the huge crane on the Royal Arsenal jetty loomed up against the sky.

'Nearly there,' cried the skipper jubilantly. 'Once that crane's abeam we'll tie up at the first wharf we come to, and sleep in the bottom of the boat.'



CHAPTER 18

MICKIE WAS DREAMING. He dreamed that Squinty Skinner with a long, bright saw was sawing off his leg. He tried madly to wriggle free, but each time he moved the saw bit deeper, and its steady grating noise set his teeth on edge. At last, with the strength of desperation, he flung up his arm, and the back of his hand met Squinty's long jaw with a crack.

The sudden, sharp pain in his knuckles as they hit *Esmeralda's* gunwale startled Mickie into wakefulness. He soon recognised the cramp in his leg for what it was, but wondered vaguely for a moment why the sound of the saw persisted, until he realised that it was the steady creak, creak, of the rope fender, ground

between *Esmeralda's* side and the timbers of the wharf. He turned restlessly on to his other side, but it was no good. What he really wanted was to stretch his legs, and he could not do that without putting his feet in Robert's face. He raised himself cautiously on his elbows.

It was a glorious night. The young moon barely outshone her myriad company of stars, that hung bright and vigilante in the midnight sky. Deep silence was on the river, a silence made more silent by the creaks and groans of mooring-ropes and fenders, and the distant clank of factories.

With infinite caution Mickie got to his feet. It was no use, he could not go on trying to sleep in that cramped and narrow space. He decided that if he could only get on one of the barges that were moored quite close he might find a nice soft cargo on which to curl up and sleep in comfort. Robert, Sally and Jane twisted in various strange attitudes, slept soundly on. Mickie felt suddenly forlorn as he looked at them. There is nothing lonelier than being awake when all your companions are sleeping, especially when you are surrounded by the beautiful and solemn spaces of the night.

Sternly telling himself not to be a mug, Mickie flung his sleeping-bag over his shoulder and clambered silently on to the wharf. A few yards brought him level with the stern of the first barge. He stepped on to it, but a brief inspection showed him that its vast hold

was completely empty. He crept around the combings, making no sound in his light gym-shoes, and found it easy enough to jump from here to the stern of the next lighter. This one, as far as he could see, was half-filled with sacks of some sort. That seemed promising. After all, he reflected, nothing could be harder than the floor-boards of *Esmeralda*, and he would at least be able to stretch his legs as much as he liked if he slept here, and that in itself would be a luxury after the previous torment.

Before jumping down he peered around to see if any signs offered of a more comfortable berth. Ahead of him he could distinguish the funnel and top-hamper of a tug, a darker smudge against the darkness of the shore. Even as he watched, a shadow seemed to detach itself from the rest, and moving quietly forward, Mickie could make out the figure of a man, staring over the rail into the water.

For a moment the stranger remained motionless, then he stirred and raised his hands to his mouth. There was a tiny splutter, and the sudden flare of a match, lighting up his face and head. Mickie started, and stared harder. Where had he seen that face before? It was no one he knew – he was positive of that – and yet it was strangely familiar. He looked with renewed interest at the tug. Had he seen her before, too?

Suddenly his heart began to thud. Of course, most tugs were very much alike. They usually had tallish

funnels and high bows – but – could it be? Or had he got the *Gertie May* on the brain?

As if in answer to his question, a snarling voice at that instant broke the silence.

‘You blazin’ fool, d’yer want the whole river to see yer?’

Subdued though they were, they carried clearly across the water – the unmistakable tones of Ben Skinner.

The man at the rail swung round with a sharp exclamation.

‘Will you be done spyin’ after me?’ he snapped. ‘Sure a man must have a breath of air, mustn’t he? Haven’t I had enough of lyin’ in ye’re foul mucky cabin all the evenin’?’

Whenever Mickie looked back on that moment, he found it impossible to tell whether the curious tingling in his scalp as he listened to the two men talking was due to excitement or to fear. On the one hand, here was the solution of all their problems – here was the *Gertie May* with her mystery passenger on board, and her sinister skipper a prey to guilty fears. On the other, there was he, Michael Lorrimer, alone and undefended in the dark, separated by only a few feet from two desperate criminals.

He could see the outline of Ben Skinner’s head, appearing now through the hatch, and with a quick movement flattened himself on the barge’s rusty deck.

‘Nah, look ’erc,’ Skinner was saying menacingly,

'I'm runnin' plenty of risks as it is, 'avin' you on board, an' I don't want them risks increased by yow foolin' around up 'ere the moment I takes me eyes off yer, see? Lucky for you I was 'ere to-day at all.'

'Sure an' I know that, Ben Skinner. If I didn't it's deaf I'd be, for ye've said it times enough, and haven't I answered ye that 'twas no choice of mine? Will ye picture the ill luck of it, Mike Doolan's place bein' raided almost befo're I'd done the job? 'Tis praisin' the saints I am that I got word of it, and didn't go there for the night, as the Major told me to.'

'Yus, and blamed lucky for you I got up 'ere a day early, too.'

'And would I be denyin' that?' The stranger paused, and a wheedling tone came into his voice: 'Sure now, Ben Skinner, it's an awful risk ha'gin' around here. Will ye not be thinkin' twice 'bout what I asked ye? 'Tis no great way to take me down the river, and ye could be back here easy by eleven to-morrow evening to meet the Major. And isn't it the happy man he'd be to know me safe out of the country! Why, maybe, it's twice the money he'll be givin' ye!'

'Ho no yer don't!' Indignation raised Skinner's voice to such a pitch that his companion laid a cautioning hand on his arm.

'Wisht, now wisht!'

'Oh' right, or' right – but understand this. I'm not takin' you nowhere till I've got the money in me 'and. In me very 'and. See?' and he thrust a menacing fist

under his companion's nose. 'So yer can jest sit 'ere wheth'er yer like it or not till Mister Bloomin' What's-'is-name shows up ter-morrow evenin' with the dough.'

'Holy Mother, an' what'll I be doin' if the police should take a look this way?'

At that moment two things happened. A large cloud crept over the moon, plunging the river in darkness – and Mickie sneezed. Whether it was dust, or the chill night air, suddenly, shatteringly, unmistakably he sneezed 'AH-TISII-HOO!'

Both the men started as though they had been shot. Then, with a speed and lightness astonishing in one of his bulk, Ben Skinner came racing down the deck of the tug. Panic-stricken, Mickie leapt to his feet and began to run. The length of the barge seemed endless, and he felt as if the wild beating of his heart would stifle him. His breath coming in gasps, the tug-master's heavy footsteps pounding behind him, he reached the stern of the barge and leapt for the bows of the next one. He landed badly, stumbled, staggered, and borne onwards by the force of his jump over-balanced into the gaping hold below.

Fortunately for him his fall was broken by the loaded sacks that half-filled the barge. For a second he lay there, dazed and winded, conscious of nothing but a sharp sickening pain in his ankle, and fear. Horrible, nightmarish fear. Then he heard the clumsy thud of Ben Skinner landing on the deck above him. Too

terrified now to move, even if he had been able, he flattened himself on the musty-smelling sacks, burying his face in them, lest the whiteness of it should catch some gleam of light in the darkness.

'Oh God, he prayed desperately, 'don't let him see me, don't let him see me, don't let him see me.'

There was a moment's hideous pause. Above him he could hear Ben Skinner's laboured breathing, as the tug-master halted, peering round to see where his quarry had got to. No year of his life had ever seemed so long to Mickie as that second of suspense. He dared not look round, nor stir a finger. He hardly even dared to breathe, although the pain in his ankle was such that at any other time he would have had hard work to keep the tears from his eyes. In the deathly silence he imagined his enemy to be creeping up on him from a dozen different directions, 'and' dared not turn his head to look, and the cold sweat of terror trickled slowly down his temples, tickling as it fell.

At last, with a suddenness that drew a gasp of alarm from Mickie, Ben Skinner spoke.

'Oo's there?'

Again that terrifying silence fell, until Mickie felt that if something didn't happen soon, he would scream at the top of his voice. After another age-long moment, there came a muttered oath from Skinner.

'Elazin' darkness - can't see a thing! Swear I 'eard somebody. Squinty!' he raised his voice. 'You seen anybody?'

Squinty, hearing the Irishman go below for safety, had scrambled on deck to see what was going on.

'No, Dad!' he cried, now in derisive tones, 'you're seein' things! – too much gin you've 'ad.'

'Shut yer trap,' snarled his father; 'there's some bloomin' kid spyin' around 'ere. I 'card 'im plain enough. Reckon I'll 'ave to look among those sacks.'

Mickie heard him grunt as he lowered his bulky form on to one knee, preparing to climb down into the hold, and he felt that all was lost. His heart thudded like a steam engine, and his every instinct urged him to run – somewhere – anywhere – so that Ben Skinner should not come upon him lying there like a trapped rat. Very cautiously he raised his head. It was pitchy dark in the shadow of the barge's side and not much better up on deck, thanks to those heaven-sent clouds, but there was the added fear that at any moment these might shift away. Wincing at the pain in his ankle, he drew up his legs, inch by inch, preparing to leap to his feet as soon as his enemy should begin climbing down.

Suddenly, a shrill whistle from Squinty pierced the silence, and at the same moment Mickie heard the distant tramp of footsteps echoing down the wooden wharf.

'Streuth!' muttered Skinner, perlice!

He hesitated a moment, but he had far too guilty a conscience to remember that he was perfectly within his rights in searching his own barge for trespassers. The presence of the Law was enough for him. Growl-

ing a string of imprecations he heaved himself to his feet again, and made his way back to the tug.

To Mickie the need for action was too urgent for him even to have time to feel relief. Scrambling up as swiftly and silently as he could, he limped and stumbled over the bulging sacks, biting his lips with pain at every step. He reached the stern of the barge at last, and was groping for the iron rungs that led up on deck, when he heard the policeman's footsteps draw level. The light of a pocket-lamp flashed over his head. He cowered down, too bewildered to know whether he had the law on his side or not, and too shaken to put it to the test. In a moment or two the light went out and the footsteps passed on. With a sigh of relief Mickie dragged himself up the ladder. Somehow he managed to reach the wharf, and somehow hobbled down it, past the next barge – on and on – gritting his teeth – till at last he saw the slender mast of *Esmeralda* looming against the sky.

The tide was ebbing still, pulling her away from the quay side, and though it had been easy to pull her alongside and climb up an hour ago, it was not so easy now to reach the mooring rope from above. Suddenly, Mickie felt that the effort of doing this was too vast to contemplate. He sat down weakly on the edge of the wharf, and raised his voice in a hoarse, penetrating whisper.

'Esmeralda ahoy! Esmeralda ahoy!'

Nobody stirred, and for one despairing moment he

thought they would never wake, and he would have to spend the rest of the night sitting there, cold and shivering. He had lost his sleeping-bag long ago, and had no intention of going back to look for it. Again he raised his voice, a little louder this time.

'*Esmeralda* ahoy! *Esmeralda* ahoy!'

In the dark shadow that was *Esmeralda*, something stirred. Slowly a head rose from the inside of her, and Robert's voice, thick with sleep, barked: 'Who's that?'

'Oh, Robert,' said Mickie, 'it's me.'

Robert struggled to his feet, and as the dinghy rocked perilously beneath him, the girls woke too, and sat up, rubbing their eyes.

'MIKE!' exclaimed Robert in astonishment, 'what the heck are you doing up there?'

'Sssh! Look out!' whispered Mickie, 'give me a hand down, there's a good chap.'

Utterly mystified, the skipper gave a tug at the mooring rope, and bringing *Esmeralda* alongside, reached up a hand to help his brother down.

• 'I say,' he said, 'have you hurt your foot?'

'Oh, yes, but never mind that now. We must get under way at once. Robert, quickly, quickly. Oh hurry, DO!'

There was a tremor of tears in Mickie's voice, and he plucked frantically and futilely at the trimly-fastened halyard. Robert whistled softly under his breath, peering at his brother's averted head. Mickie

had evidently been in some sort of a scrape, but it was most unlike him not to burst immediately into a highly-coloured account of it.

'What's up, old chap?' enquired the skipper at last.

'*Gertie May*,' blurted Mickie, jerking his head towards her. His eyes stung, and his throat ached, and the appalling fact could no longer be denied, that if he were to utter another word, he would burst into tears. He was too young to realise that this was the natural reaction from the shock of his fall, coupled with the fright Ben Skinner had given him. He crouched in an agony of shame at the foot of the mast, praying that the others would not notice — that they would not press him for explanations, but would take him at his word and set sail.

Actually, Robert was the only one who did notice. The girls broke into a chorus of startled exclamations at the mention of the *Gertie May*, but he silenced them with a quick gesture. He knew that it took something pretty serious to bring Mickie anywhere near to tears, but quite apart from this, he had sufficient faith in his brother to know that, harum-scarum as he might be, he would not give them a false alarm at a time like this.

'Come on, chaps,' he said quietly, 'make sail as quick as you can. The tide ought to be turning any minute now, and I believe the wind's gone right round to the east. If it has, we'll be up the river in two shakes.'

'But if the *Gertie May* —' began Jane.

'Shut up, Pug,' he snapped with unaccustomed severity, 'stop arguing and do as you're told.'

'Oh dear,' mourned Sally, struggling out of her sleeping-bag, 'I'm so sleepy, I don't think I *can* wake up. And I must say I should have thought if the *Gertie* —'

'Look here!' interrupted Robert desperately, as a strangled snort came from Mickie, 'the next person to say *Gertie May* gets a bucket of water over their head, d'you understand? Now then, will you get going?'

Something of the urgency in his voice penetrated their sleepy wits at last, and making a valiant effort, they stowed their sleeping-gear, and made ready to set sail. The clouds were racing now across the sky, giving them fitful glimpses of moonlight, and with this, and the light of the skipper's pocket-torch, they managed to see more or less what they were doing. Somehow, Robert managed to see that everything was done correctly, and yet prevent either of the girls talking to Mickie, and as soon as they were fairly under way, he ordered captain's biscuits and chocolate all round. The starboard watch was in charge, so Sally and Mickie huddled down side by side in the bottom of the boat, in a nest of oilskins and sleeping-bags, and everybody munched in thoughtful silence.

At last Jane could bear it no longer.

'Robert,' she said cautiously, 'can I say — you know what?'

'What *do* you mean?' asked the skipper.

'Well, you know you said you'd throw a bucket of water over the next person to say – well, you know. Well, I didn't say it any more, so can I now?'

Looking at his sister's earnest and anxious face, Mickie began to giggle. There was something so infectious about the sound, and Robert, for one, was so relieved to hear it, that he and Sally followed suit, and in a moment they were all laughing helplessly and a little hysterically, while Jane, bewildered and indignant, still struggled to make herself heard.

'Well, Robert, you did say well, anyway, I suppose I can say it now – and after all I should have thought it pretty important. I mean, surely we ought to do something about it, instead of just running away. Oh, *do* stop laughing, you stupid idiots. I don't see anything funny about it. I thought it was all so important, anyway.'

'Go on, Pug, SAY it!' gasped Robert.

'All right then, I will,' said Jane stoutly, though she cast a wary eye at the bucket. 'Where was the *Gentle May*, anyway, and as we've chased her all down the river specially, why didn't we stay and watch her? It seems just silly to me.'

'Well now,' said Robert, pulling himself together, and seeing the crisis over, 'I think, if you feel like it Mike, you might tell us what really happened to you.'

'All right,' said Mickie. He was feeling a good deal

better now. His heart rose in proportion as the waters widened, between *Esmeralda* and those terrible barges, and already he was turning over in his mind a few incidents with which to embellish his story. Actually, however, little embellishment was needed. The whole adventure and his various emotions, came back to him so vividly as he spoke, that the others listened enthralled.

It was when he was describing the stranger aboard the *Gertie May* that light broke suddenly upon him.

'He sounded as if he were Irish,' he was saying, when he suddenly stopped, and gave a piercing whistle 'I say, Sally! I've got it. Remember that chap whose photograph they had stuck all over Wapping Police Station? Well, it was *him*!'

'What?' gasped Silly, 'who? - OH - HIM. The I.R.A. man? Mickie, are you sure?'

'Sure? I should jolly well think I am! Why, I saw him as plain as plain when he lit the cigarette and he'd got that scar and everything. I told you I couldn't think where I'd seen him before. Where else could I have, anyway? And why else should Ben Skinner be helping him to escape, anyway? Robert, it IS him, I know it is!'

'Well, if it is,' said Robert cautiously, 'that explains a lot. Go on, though, Mike. Let's hear the rest of the story.'

So Mickie went on. He certainly needed no exaggeration now to get his effects. His family expressions

alternated between sympathy, admiration and terror, as they listened, and as he finished they broke into a clamour of exclamation. Jane's comment, as usual, was practical.

'I should think you've sprained your ankle. Oughtn't we to look and see?'

Mickie produced his damaged foot with the pride of a wounded warrior and gingerly took off his shoe. It certainly was swollen, with a purplish streak down one side of it.

'I should think it is a bit of a sprain, old chap,' said Robert. 'Has anybody got a hankey?'

'Mc,' said Jane promptly, and giving no sign of what the sacrifice cost her, produced the scarlet handkerchief Mickie had given her after their quarrel days before. Even her staunch spirit was sorely tried when Robert dipped this sacred 'object into the muddy waters of the river, but she managed to restrain her anguished protests and even helped him bind the injured ankle.

'Ouch!' cried Mickie, 'that's cold.'

'Course it is,' said Robert, 'that's to stop it swelling. Now then,' he went on, as he knotted it tightly, 'we've got to decide what we're going to do. At least, actually, it's obvious. We've got to get back to Wapping.'

'Supposing Jim isn't there?' said Sally.

'Doesn't matter even if he isn't,' said the skipper stoutly, 'we know Rory O'Moore is aboard the *Gertie*

May, that Ben Skinner is trying to get him out of the country, and that they'll be staying at Woolwich till the chap arrives with the money at eleven to-morrow night. Why it's all as clear as daylight. All we've got to do is nip down-river and pinch the lot of 'em. Good old Mike, what a lucky thing you couldn't sleep!

'What a lucky thing Ben Skinner didn't catch him, you mean,' said Jane, and her large blue eyes brimmed with tears as she thought of all the terrible things Ben Skinner might have done to her beloved twin.

'Oh, Mickie, *darling*, I'm so glad you're safe!' she cried, flinging her arms around him in an access of emotion.

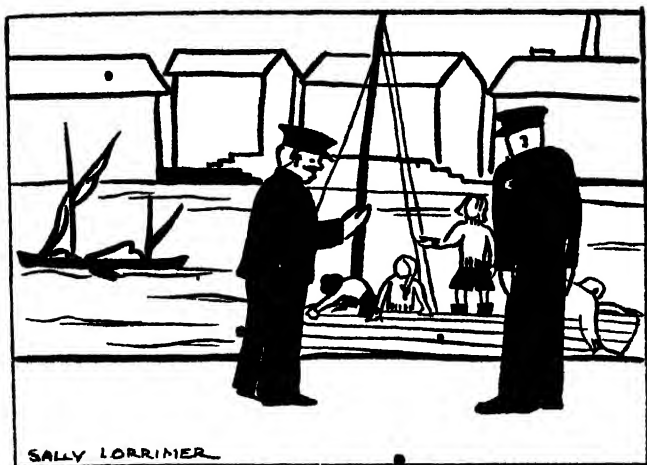
'Here, I say, stow it,' protested Mickie, considerably embarrassed, but not altogether displeased.

'Yes, stow it, Pug, and attend to business,' said the skipper, 'we've got to make a record passage now, if ever we did. Thank the Lord we've got a fair wind and tide, and if we stick to it we ought to make Wapping easily by seven-thirty.'

• And so, in fact, they did. A fair wind was such a novelty after the tiring beat up from the Nore, that they were astonished at the speed with which they raced up the river. Nobody made any definite effort to sleep, but they all dozed at intervals, and chattered a good deal, and sang occasionally. The intervals of sleep lengthened, and the chattering grew less, as the night wore on, and Sally and Mickie and Jane were

once more fast asleep when Robert's voice cut clearly through their dreams.

'Land-ho, *Esmeralda*! Wapping coming up on the starboard bow!'



CHAPTER 19

THEY LOWERED SAIL and made fast to the pontoon. As they did so a police launch came alongside, and its three occupants looked with suspicion at *Esmeralda's* draggled crew.

'I say,' said one, who appeared to be an officer, 'you're out a bit early, aren't you? You can't tie up here now – this is a police station.'

'Oh, we know that,' replied Robert, 'as a matter of fact, we're looking for a person called Jim Jarvis. He runs the inspection boat.'

'Sergeant Jarvis! Oh, he won't be in till midday. Got any visiting-cards on you?'

The three men clucked, and Robert flushed with

annoyance. Behind him he could hear Mickie drawing breath to protest, but he stopped him with a raised hand, and said icily: 'Oh, I know you're being very funny and all that, but this happens to be a matter of national importance.'

'National importance!' The sergeant gave a melodramatic whistle. 'I say, they haven't started a war, have they?'

'No!' exclaimed Robert furiously, 'but they probably jolly soon will, if you don't get a move on.'

This remark was a tactical error, for it removed the last shred of doubt from the officer's mind. On and around the river he came into daily contact with boys and girls of every age, and one and all were alike in their disrespect for the law. Unkempt as his appearance was, this particular youth spoke as though he should have known better, but it was obvious from his extravagant statements that he was doing his best to pull the leg of the Metropolitan Police, Thames Division.

'Now, now, youngster,' said the sergeant good-naturedly enough, 'if there's any wars about, we can take care of them. I don't know how you got here, and maybe I'd best not ask you how you came by this boat, but if I was you I'd get going while the going's good.'

Then Robert, tired with the strain of the past days, lost his temper completely.

'All right!' he snapped, 'if that's the gratitude we get

for coming to warn you, just to be told we're boat thieves, you can jolly well whistle for your information, for all I care.'

'And I hope you get bombed in your beds!' shrilled Mickie loyally.

'Come on,' said Robert, tugging at the painter, 'cast off, Mike, and let's leave 'em to it.'

'Oh dear,' cried Jane desperately, 'we *can't* just leave it like this. Look,' and she turned beseeching eyes on the sergeant, 'it really is most awfully important. It's that wicked man you're looking for – well, I mean, we know where he is – actually, we've followed him all down the river, and the other one will be there too, and we can show you and you can arrest them all, and it'll jolly well serve Squinty right, anyway, spitting on our boat.'

Disastrous phrase! Faint beginnings of belief had blossomed for a moment in the sergeant's eyes, as Jane poured out her earnest and incoherent tale, but at the mention of Squinty's spitting all his mistrust returned. He saw, now, not so much a plot to pull his leg, as an ill-judged attempt to score off a rival by a trumped-up charge.

'Sorry, missy, nothing doing,' he said sternly, but not unkindly. 'Now you take my advice and get along home. You've no business to be out at this hour in the morning, anyway. Why, it's not eight o'clock yet.'

'Now look here,' said Sally, with the calm of desperation, 'we do happen to be telling the truth, but

you don't believe us. All right then, the least you can do after we've taken all the trouble to come, is to let us stay here till our friend, Jim Jarvis, comes back.'

'Yes, he'd know better than to question the word of a Lorrimer,' cried Jane dramatically.

The sergeant considered for a moment. In the back of his mind a faint doubt was stirring again. These queer-looking children did seem to be very much in earnest about something or other, and if they really were friends of Sergeant Jarvis's - might there be something in what they said? But then common sense took hold of him again. Supposing he believed them, and went haring off down-river on some wild-goose chase, what a laughing-stock he would be in the station! Why, he would never hear the last of it. At the same time they didn't seem such bad kids after all, and supposing he let them wait here till Jarvis came along, they could tell him their cock and bull story, and it would be up to him to investigate it. That seemed to let him, Sergeant Willis, out either way.

'All right,' he said, 'if you'll give me your word not to go fooling around, you can stay here till Sergeant Jarvis comes.'

Robert's lips tightened, and his eyes glinted dangerously, but before he could say anything to make matters worse, Sally interposed.

'Thank you very much, that will do nicely.'

'Better come in and have a bite o' breakfast, hadn't you?' invited the sergeant, slightly mollified.

'No thanks,' said Robert rudely, 'we've plenty of food of our own. We don't need to come ashore at all. We'll just wait here in our own boat' – he emphasised 'our own' – 'till Jim comes along.' . .

When the policeman had disappeared into the station, Sally and Jane came in for a certain amount of recrimination from their brothers, who felt they had humbled the family pride by asking favours of the author of such insulting insinuations. Nevertheless, as the offenders pointed out with some justice, it would have been madness to go away and allow their enemies to escape unscathed, simply to satisfy family pride.

This question settled, they turned their attention to breakfast. Sally, as caterer-in-chief, was determined that this meal should be a hot one, risky though it might be to prepare it. Accordingly, she persuaded Robert, who, indeed was in no mood to be cautious, to get the Primus going, and soon the succulent smell of frying was floating on the breeze, and she crammed into the pan bacon and eggs, tinned salmon and bread.

- They all ate till they could eat no more, washing down the feast with the remains of the milk, carefully shared out by Sally. By the time they had finished, and had cleared up the debris, washing mugs and plates in the river, it was just ten o'clock.

'Now look,' said Robert, his good temper restored, 'we'd better get our story properly sorted out, and ready to tell Jim when he does come. We certainly did

make rather a hash of it between us last time, I suppose.'

By the time everybody had thoroughly voiced an opinion on the subject a thin drizzle was setting in. The skipper, in addition, was beginning to feel increasingly self-conscious as one police boat after another came alongside, and one policeman after another enquired what they were doing there.

'I say,' he said at last, 'let's get right round to the back of the pontoon, and rig the mainsail over the boom. That'll keep us dry, and at the same time stop everybody looking at us.'

This was soon done. Working the dinghy round the pontoon with their hands, they hung the sail tent fashion over the boom. This made an excellent shelter from both rain and prying eyes. The atmosphere soon became pleasantly warm, if slightly stuffy, and before long the twins began to yawn. They had made themselves extremely comfortable with coats and sleeping-bags, *Esmeralda* rocked gently on the water, and in another moment both Mickie and Jane were sound asleep. The elders kept their eyes open a little longer, but they dared not talk or move for fear of waking the twins. It had been a brief and disturbed night, to say the least of it, and there really did not seem much point in trying to keep awake. . . . With a little sigh, Sally snuggled down by the centre plate, and Robert, after a brief hesitation, followed suit.

'Esmeralda ahoy! Have you all been drugged?'

The skipper started into wakefulness as Jim's cheerful tones echoed under the canvas. They rubbed their eyes and looked at him owlishly, before they realised, with a jump, where they were.

'Gosh,' said Robert, 'we must have been asleep.'

'Asleep? I'll say you were!' chuckled Jim, 'why, I've been at the station two hours and you've never stirred!'

Robert looked at his watch, and saw to his astonishment that it was after three o'clock. They had slept for over four hours.

'Holy Moses! What about the *Gertie May*?' cried Mickie anxiously.

'Yes, now,' said Jim, 'what is all this story about wanted men? What have you kids been up to down-river?'

'Oh, Jim,' exclaimed Jane, 'it's true, it really is, and they wouldn't believe us, the silly stupid, but you do, don't you?'

'Hold hard a minute,' he protested, 'I haven't heard what it is yet. Better come ashore and tell the whole story.'

He listened attentively to their tale, only throwing in a shrewd question here and there. When they had done he slapped Mickie on the back.

'Seems as if you've done it all right this time, young feller-me-lad,' he exclaimed. 'Rory O'Moore in Ben Skinner's tug? My stars, what a find! Come up to the

station, all of you. We'll have to get moving pretty quick.'

It was a moment of glorious triumph for the Lorrimers, when they heard their story succinctly outlined to an inspector by Jim, under the crestfallen gaze of Sergeant Willis. The inspector passed from disbelief to wonder, and finally to obvious excitement. Then followed a series of searching questions, as to the exact words, appearance, and voice of Ben Skinner's various associates, and before long crisp orders were being rapped out.

'If what this lad has said is true, Ben Skinner won't move till he gets his money. Therefore, if we board the *Gertie May* just after eleven, we ought to pinch the lot of 'em. You're positive he said eleven to-night, my lad?'

'Certain, sir,' said Mickie, 'absolutely *certain*.'

'Good! Then, Sergeant, detail two boats to be ready at ten, three men in each – and we'd better get Bentink from the Yard – O'Moore is his pigeon in a manner of speaking. It'll be dark, so we oughtn't to have any trouble getting aboard. I suppose you can't tell us exactly which wharf the *Gertie May*'s lying at, can you?'

'Well, not absolutely exactly,' said Robert, 'but we can easily show you when we get down there.'

'When you . . .' exclaimed the inspector, and then chuckled. 'Now look here, youngsters, you've done a magnificent piece of work, and you'll hear more of

it, but get this into your heads - no more trapesing about the river at midnight for you.'

'Oh, but that isn't fair!' cried Jane, '*we* found him. *We must* go!'

'Sorry,' said the inspector, 'I wouldn't take the responsibility. Remember, we're dealing with desperate men, and it's going to be no affair for kids. No, it's home for you, as soon as you can go, and a nice peaceful night in your beds for a change!'

'Well . . .' began Jane and Mickie simultaneously, only to be checked by a couple of violent kicks from Robert.

'All right, sir,' he said politely, 'we'll be going.'

'Good lad,' said the inspector, 'look here, though, you haven't had any lunch, have you? Jarvis, take them along to the canteen and get George to cook them some sausages.'

This, at least, seemed a welcome suggestion. Their appetites satisfied, however, Robert led his brother and sisters to a corner of the room.

'Look here,' he muttered, 'don't say any more about going home. Just pretend we're going all right, and then we can snoop off and get a bus to Woolwich, and get there before they do.'

'Gosh!' exclaimed Mickie loudly, to be doubled up by a dig in the stomach from his brother's elbow.

'Shut up, you ass! Do you want the whole station to hear?'

'All right, all right – but it certainly is a wizard idea'

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

An hour later they clambered off a bus in Woolwich High Street

'What on earth are we going to do now?' questioned Sally, 'I thought it would take much longer than this, and it's only tea-time really. But I must say I feel a bit full for tea.'

'So do I,' said the others

'I tell you what,' Robert said suddenly, 'we ought to ring up Heidi. We haven't done that since Tuesday, you know – and there might be another letter from Mummy. We'll reverse the charges.'

There was a telephone booth at the corner of the street, and they crowded into it, while Robert got through to Heidi. Even Mickie, who was standing outside, could hear the shrill squeal of her excited tones coming over the wire.

'Ach, Robert, I haf wondered where you are! Here has a telegram come!'

'What? I say, Heidi, open it QUICK!'

'Yes, yes, wait, hebling, wait, I have him in the hall, I open him up now.'

There was a moment of frightful suspense, and then the telephone began to click again. 'O Gott, O Gott, the liebe Herr!'

'Oh, Heidi, buck up!' cried Robert in anguish, 'what is it?'

'Ach, Robert, it is the Gnädige Frau and the Herr Papa, they are in an aeroplane, on Saturday they are home!'

'SATURDAY! Crumbs, that's to-morrow!'

'Yes, yes, to-morrow they come.'

The respectable inhabitants of Woolwich jumped almost out of their skins as a series of frantic war-whoops echoed from the telephone box.

'TO-MORROW! Heidl, is it true? Are you sure?'

'But of course it is true! And you, kinder, where are you? You will be home to-night?'

'To-night? Oh!' Robert looked desperately round at his brother and sisters. One and all shook their heads violently, even while they danced with excitement.

'Oh-er - no, Heidl,' he continued. 'No, I don't think we shall be home to-night, actually. We're rather busy, but we'll be in first thing in the morning, you bet!'

It took the children some time to calm their excitement. Mummy and Daddy home to-morrow. It seemed almost too good to be true. Even so, however, they were as determined as ever to see the arrest of Ben Skinner. As Robert pointed out, they could get a lift back to Wapping, and then if they set off in *Esmeralda* as soon as they got there, they would have a fair tide from about 3 a.m. onwards and should reach Hammeismith by breakfast-time. After all, what was a little sleep more or less when it came to an adventure of this magnitude?

The question then arose, as to how they should pass the time until dark fell, and it was safe to approach the *Gertie May*. They finally decided that it should be dark enough at ten to reach the riverside and slip along the wharf unseen by Skinner or his associates, and they could then hide until they saw the police board the tug.

This left them with about four hours to fill in. The obvious solution was a cinema, and Robert, on investigation, discovered that he had four shillings remaining.

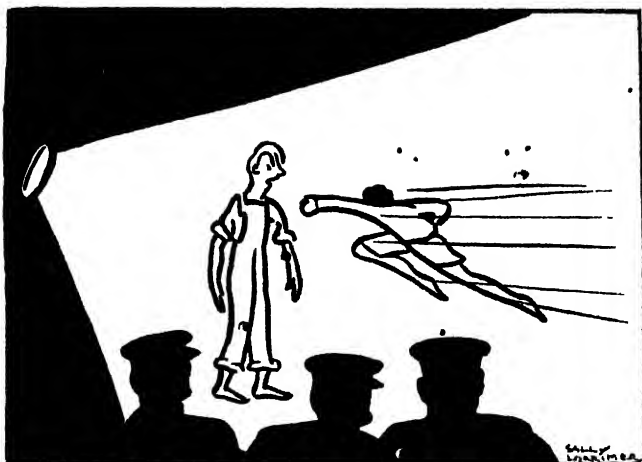
'Exactly right,' he said, with satisfaction. 'So long as we can get in for a bob.'

'It won't leave us anything over though,' said Jane cautiously.

'Oh, never mind,' cried Mickie, 'we shan't want it, anyway, if we go back to Hammersmith in *Esmeralda*.'

'In fact,' said Jane, 'it would make a reason why we'd have to sail back.'

That settled it, and to the cinema they went



CHAPTER 20

IT WAS VERY NEARLY DARK when they emerged at about a quarter to ten. They had little difficulty in finding their way down to the waterside, though one or two people of whom they made enquiries, glanced curiously at the dishevelled-looking children, and wondered what they could be wanting with the river at that time of night. One, in fact, went so far as to ask, but this curiosity merely lent wings to Mickie's imagination.

'Oh,' he said airily, while Robert was still wondering what to reply. 'we live with our father on a barge, and we're tied up here for the night; we came ashore for a cinema, but we've lost our way back.'

Jane was much shocked at this duplicity, but Robert chuckled and said: 'Good old Mike! Serves him right for being so inquisitive!'

They kept rather close to one another as they made their way down the dark, narrow streets. Wet with recent rain, the paving-stones shone dully, and once Mickie, still limping slightly from his twisted ankle, trod heavily in a puddle. The shriek that Jane gave as the icy water splashed over her bare legs, made them all jump, and Sally clutched Robert's arm with a gasp.

'Here, buck up,' said the skipper, trying not to glance over his shoulders as footsteps sounded hollowly behind them. A rough-looking man slouched past in the shadows, turning to stare at them with suspicious eyes. A cat streaked suddenly across the street, and another yowled eerily from the roof-tops.

'I say,' said Mickie with a wistful look, 'this reminds me of a story I read about a chap who was found strangled...'

'MICKIE!' cried Sally, and 'Shut up, you ass,' said Robert.

They walked on in silence, their gym shoes making no sound on the cobbles. Sally still clung to Robert's arm, and Mickie was gratified when Jane's small, hot hand crept into his, gripping it tightly as she glanced fearfully about her.

'Buck up, Pug,' he whispered. 'Nearly there now.'

In another moment they could make out the black waters of the river, shining sombrely before them. Whatever terrors darkness might hold for them, their

own beloved river could have none. It seemed to welcome them, and they almost felt they ought to apologise to it for having made the journey from Wapping by bus instead of by boat.

The next problem was how to find from the land, and in the dark, the wharf where they had tied up the night before. This, however, was solved by the observant Robert, who had noted their position in relation to an electric sign on the opposite bank.

Working their way along from this, it was not many minutes before Mickie, staring through the gloom, made out the all too familiar form of the *Gertie May*.

'That's her,' he whispered hoarsely.

'Sure?' asked Robert.

'Dead cert. I'd know her anywhere in the dark now,' said Mickie, with a reminiscent shudder.

'Good for you. Come on, now, we've got to find somewhere to watch her from without being seen.'

Keeping well within the shadow of the buildings that lined the wharf, they crept slowly on. After a few moments Robert pointed silently ahead.

'If we can slip across one by one, we can nip on to those barges just ahead of her. We'd see perfectly from there without anybody seeing us.'

At the mention of barges, Jane felt Mickie's hand tighten suddenly on hers. She privately thought it was rather tactless of Robert to suggest such a plan, after her brother's adventures of the night before. She knew that nothing would make him admit any reluctance,

however, so pretending a fear that she no longer felt, she clung to his hand more tightly still for a moment, hoping to instil a little comfort. One by one they slipped across the patch of dim light that edged the wharf, and clambered on to the barge.

It seemed an eternity that they lay there, flat on their faces, peering cautiously over the gunwale. The coal dust with which the combing was sprinkled, pricked their bare knees, and they got pins and needles in their elbows from propping up their faces on their hands. In addition to this, they had no shelter from the breeze, which blew freshly across the river, and soon they began to shiver with cold.

It was so dark by now, with clouds obscuring both moon and stars, that they could barely make out the outline of the *Gertie May*. They could hear an occasional murmur of voices aboard, but no one came on deck, though the hatch was once flung back with a clatter. They were just too far away to hear what was being said, or who it was that spoke, and very soon they gave up fruitlessly straining their ears.

There was absolutely no way to hurry the slow minutes. All their usual devices, such as song, argument, or guessing games were out of the question, for the faintest whisper brought an indignant pinch from Robert. No, the only thing to be done was to bear it as best they could. The effort of keeping still told on their muscles and nerves, and their legs, one moment dead and heavy, the next would twitch uncontrollably.

At last, just as Sally was deciding she could not keep still a second longer, and, risking Robert's fury, would jump down into the hold and do some exercises, there came a soft footfall along the wharf. Instantly Robert signed to his crew to duck their heads, though he himself continued to peer cautiously over the edge with one eye. A shadowy figure loomed up out of the darkness, and pausing almost abreast of the tug, whistled softly twice.

'Gertie May?'

Ben Skinner's bullet head was thrust out of the hatch. 'Oo is it?'

'You know me.'

A torch flashed for a second across the deck, illuminating the stranger's face. He spun round as if he had been shot.

'Put that out, you fool!' he snarled, and with a throaty chuckle the tug-master snapped out the light.

'Or' right, mister: windy, ain't you? Come aboard.'

Robert watched him board the tug and go below, and then signalled to the others that they could safely raise their heads out of the coal dust. Jane stared anxiously all round, and then, beckoning to Mickie, breathed heavily in his ear.

'Where's the police?' she whispered. *'They'll be too late!'*

He raised his hand, and far away up the river she heard the mutter of an engine. Her scalp pricked, and her whole body felt taut with excitement. Slowly, oh

so slowly, the sound came nearer. She peered into the darkness with straining eyes, and beside her Mickie was breathing in short, excited gasps.

All at once, out of the shadows, a darker shadow seemed to take shape upon the water. The Lorrimers stared in astonishment. This couldn't be the police already. The engine still sounded quite far away. They held their breath and stared again.

In a flash they realised. This was the first boat, drifting down on the tide with engines shut off, and just enough steerage way left on her to enable her crew to guide her into the shore with the help of a sweep. She came silently alongside, astern of their barge, and as the men made her fast and climbed out, Robert suddenly flattened himself in the coal-dust.

'Down!' he whispered, 'or they'll see us.'

When they cautiously raised their heads again, the three policemen were moving quietly into the shadows of the warehouses abreast of the *Gertie May*. Almost at the same instant the splutter of the nearing patrol-boat grew louder, then changed its note suddenly as the engine was thrown into reverse.

Round the curve of the *Gertie May's* side it slid into view, brought up on her port bow, and in an instant was made fast. One after another her four occupants scrambled on to the deck of the tug, and simultaneously the three figures on the wharf moved forward.

It had all happened so swiftly and so silently, that the children, looking on enthralled, felt as if they were

watching some shadow show. They held their breath, as the policemen paused, silhouetted on the deck of the *Gertie May*. Then, with a crash that startled them nearly out of their wits, a hatch was flung back and Ben Skinner's head appeared. For a second he gazed blankly about him, unable to make out a thing in the darkness.

'Oo's there?' he demanded.

One of the policemen slipped forward, flashing a torch suddenly on the tug-master's face.

'Benjamin Skinner? I have a warrant to search your tug.'

'What the —' Skinner's jaw dropped. For once in his life he seemed utterly taken aback — too much astonished even to swear. Then realisation came to him and he tried to brazen it out.

'Ho, no yer don't! I'm not going to 'ave any lousy perlice pryin' round my boat! Yer've got nuffink on me, an' yer knows it!'

'It's no use, Skinner,' interrupted the police officer dryly. 'You know who we're looking for, and you know where they are. Come on, now — we don't like using force, you know.'

'I tell yer ye're barking up the wrong tree! I don't know nuffink about no wanted men.'

Very well then, you can have no objection to our searching your vessel. Come on, now, out of the way — get on deck.'

Realising that the game was up the tug-master glared

desperately around him, but grim, silent figures seemed to tower on every side. Slowly and clumsily he climbed out of the hatch, and as he stood there his whole truculent body seemed suddenly to droop and change, and his face in the light of a lantern took on a sickly leer.

'See 'ere, guv'nor,' he whined, 'I didn't know yer wanted 'em, honest I didn't. I only took 'em on casual like.'

A sudden crash from the stern interrupted him. Quick as lightning two of the policemen dashed aft, and in a moment reappeared, each struggling wildly with a man. Their freedom at stake, the two fugitives fought like madmen. Thud – thud, came the sound of fist meeting flesh, and the stamp of feet on the deck. The children could hear the sharp hiss of indrawn breath mingled with savage grunts of satisfaction as each good blow went home.

The struggling mass fell to the deck.

'Get the handcuffs on 'em,' gasped one of the police officers. A whistle shrilled in the bow and the three men on shore leapt in to finish the struggle. They dragged the captives to their feet and a torch shone out again, this time illuminating the sullen faces of the two Irishmen.

'It's them all right,' said the inspector quietly. 'O'Moore and Delancy. Go below and see if there's anything more to be found.'

A moment later there came a squeal from the coal

bunkers, like that of a trapped rat, and a policeman returned on deck dragging an abject figure by the ear.

'That's the lot, sir,' he said, giving Squinty a push forward into the torch-light.

The children, craning forward now, too interested to be cautious, exulted in the terrified mien of their enemy, as he cowered before the inspector.

'I ain't done nuffink,' he sniffed. 'Lemme go. I didn't know they was on-board.'

'That's enough from you, young fellow, we'll see about that at the station,' said the inspector tersely.

'Cor!' Ben Skinner broke in. 'I'd give summat to know 'oo split on us. I'd bet them young devils in the sailing boat 'ad a finger in it.'

'They had more than a finger in it!' burst out Jim, with a pride no longer to be contained.

A sudden spasm of braggart courage possessed Squinty. He forgot his terror in a surge of fury.

'You leave 'em to me, Pa!' he cried. 'Next time they shows their faces on the river I'll knock the lights out of 'em, see if I don't!'

'WILL YOU!' came a yell from the darkness and over the bows of the tug a small black thunderbolt hurtled. Squinty's mouth, still open from his boast, caught the full force of Mickie's tight-clenched fist. In the rain of blows that followed, Squinty lost his head completely, hitting out blindly and futilely, and emitting howls of pain and fright.

For a moment the police looked on, paralysed with

astonishment. Then they fell on the struggling pair, and with infinite difficulty tore them apart.

'What on earth's this?' cried the astonished inspector, and before Jim had time to answer, three voices from the barge said:

'It's only us!'

'What?' exclaimed the inspector, 'YOU AGAIN!'

Robert and Sally scrambled over the bows and advanced apologetically.

'Where's the rest of you? I thought there was one more.'

'There is. There's ME, but I can't get up!' came an agonised voice, and Jim, stifling a guffaw, stepped forward and yanked Jane over the bows by the scruff of her neck.

'You little rascallions!' said the inspector, surveying the dishevelled four. 'You ought to be put in irons for disobeying orders! Back to the station you come!'



CHAPTER 21

THE JOURNEY BACK to Wapping passed in a flash. The children realised suddenly how desperately tired they were. They huddled together in the bottom of Jim's boat, tucked up in coats, and for a few moments stared with wide eyes at the river, and the lights that flashed so quickly past. Then one by one their heads drooped, and almost before they had realised that they were falling asleep, Jim was shaking them by the shoulder.

'Wake up, youngsters, wake up,' he was saying.

'Whassermarrer?' asked Jane, wriggling crossly away, and burying her head in the coats again. 'Engine stopped?'

‘Why, no,’ said Jim, laughing. ‘You’ve been asleep for an hour, and we’re back at Wapping again. I’m afraid you must wake up now.’

Slowly the children shook, and rubbed, and stretched themselves into wakefulness, and with Jim’s help climbed stiffly ashore. He led them into the canteen, where a policeman was already established, brewing cocoa. The hot inviting smell of this brew did more than anything to bring the Lorrners to their full senses, and they were soon crowding round, clasping the steaming mugs with both hands, as they gingerly sipped the cocoa.

Ben Skinner, Squinty, and the two Irishmen had been led off to the cells, and all the police who were not on duty were soon sitting or standing about, discussing the events of the night.

‘Buck up with your cocoa, you kids,’ said Jim, grinning at them. ‘The sooner you’re on your way home in a taxi the better.’

‘A taxi!’ exclaimed Jane. ‘Oh, but *Esmeralda*’s here. We can sail home.’

‘What, at this time of night? D’you happen to know what the time is? You ought to have been tucked up in bed hours ago.’

‘Good Lord,’ exclaimed Mickie, touched on the raw. ‘Why, we often sail all night. We really like it best, actually.’

‘Maybe, maybe, but not to-night, my young cock-sparrow,’ said Jim with decision. ‘You can hardly keep

on your feet as it is. No, it's a taxi for you, and bed as quick as you can get there.'

'But —' began Mickie and Jane, when the suave tones of Robert interrupted them.

'Jim's quite right, chaps,' he said, dealing his indignant brother and sister a surreptitious pinch. 'We ought to do as he says. We'll just go and see that *Esmeralda's* all right and ship-shape, and then we'll be ready to go.'

'That's the boy!' said Jim. 'I'll come and give you a hand.'

'Oh, no, thank you,' returned Robert politely. 'We like to do it ourselves. Don't bother, we shan't be long.'

He hustled the others out of the room, and Jim, who always respected the Lorriners' independence, settled down to another cup of cocoa. He was bursting with pride in his protégés, and passed a pleasant quarter of an hour detailing some of their adventures to his colleagues, before it occurred to him that they were being rather a long time. A sudden echo of Robert's unusual politeness came to him, stirring a chord in his memory, and filled with a dreadful suspicion he dashed from the room and out on to the pontoon.

In the neatly coiled painter by which *Esmeralda* had been secured, a crumpled piece of paper glimmered whitely.

Dear Jim [it said]. We know you mean it for our good,

*but we had to take Esmeralda home. See you at Ham-
smith one day soon.*

*Love from Robert
Sally
Michael
Jane*

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

'But Robert,' said Jane, with a worried frown, 'you did tell Jim a lie, really.'

'No, I didn't,' said Robert, 'I only said he was right - and so he was, only we're right, and I said we ought to do as he said, and so we ought, only we didn't, and I said we'd be ready to go when we'd fixed *Esmeralda*, and so we were - in fact, we went.'

'But Mummy says, -' began Jane.

'Look here, Pug,' interrupted Robert, 'I know you're usually right about things like that, but this time all that matters is that we should take *Esmeralda* up-river ourselves and see her safely moored at Hammersmith before we go home. If we want a bit of extra sleep, we can always have it to-morrow night. Isn't, that right, you chips?'

'Yes,' chorused the others, and the decision in their tones was enough to convince even the difficult conscience of Jane.

'I say,' cried Mickie, 'here's Tower Bridge already.'

Black and immense against the starlit sky, the two familiar towers loomed before them, as they rounded

the bend above Wapping. It was just half-past one, and there was still another hour of the ebb tide to run, but the fair wind that had carried them up the lower reaches the night before was blowing still with a steady, friendly force. The little ship danced over the waves as though she was as pleased to be free again as were her crew, and speeding far from the clutches of law and order. As they slid through the Pool, the riding lights of the various vessels moored there seemed like amiable, inquisitive eyes, that watched them on their way; and all around them, faint above the slap of the water against their bow, they could hear the distant clanks and creaks and echoing sounds that are the voice of the London River.

It was not long before Robert was conscious that the tide was slackening beneath them, and as they shot Southwark Bridge the young flood took *Esmeralda* in its kind grip and hurried her on her way.

By mutual consent there were no watches this night. It was an altogether special and magic voyage this. It was the return of the warriors - the homecoming of the explorers - but more than all, it was the bringing safe to harbour of a gallant ship, that had braved strange waters, sailed uncharted seas and carried her crew unscathed through it all.

Jane did not even take the tiller. Wide-eyed and silent she leaned her chin upon the gunwale, watching the pattern of the stars in the ebony water, and the stiff, shadowy shapes that towered on either bank. The

chuckle of the waves wove a pattern in her brain, and with all her small circumscribed soul she longed for words. Her fingers tapped rhythmically on the forward thwart, as she counted over and over again the syllables that would not scan. How any poet had ever reconciled sentiment with scansion was more than she could see.

Through the black of night the little ship sailed,
While the moon shone overhead,
And the stars were bright in the distant sky,
And the mariners longed for their bed.

Staunch at the helm the skipper sat,
His eyes fixed sternly before,
'Gird in your hungry belts, my crew,
For we have been to the North.'

'But my belt isn't hungry,' protested Mickie, when his sister chanted her epic. 'I've had lots to eat, and anyway, how could a belt be hungry?'

'Oh, Mickie, don't be so stupid,' said the indignant poet. 'That's - that's - metaphor, or something. You never saw what you really mean in poetry.'

'Well, anyway,' said Sally, 'I think it's jolly good. I bet you'll be Poet Laureate one day, Jane.'

Beaming and blissful, Jane subsided, but still her lips worked feverishly as she repeated over and over to herself her precious lines, lest one word of them should be forgotten before she committed them to paper.

All at once, Sally, gazing out over the stern, cried: 'Look! I believe it's getting light!'

Far away to the east a tinge of grey was mingling with the dusky blue of the sky, dimming the stars. They watched, fascinated. Minute by minute, almost imperceptibly, the shadow of the night rolled back, until the whole sky was a soft pearl grey.

'Oh, dear,' said Jane, shivering slightly, 'it's a horrid old grey day, and I did so hope it would be sunny to take us home.'

'Don't be an ass,' said Robert, 'the sun hasn't come up yet.'

'Oh!' Round-eyed, Jane considered this miracle. How funny that it should get light before the sun came up at all. She had been fast asleep by the time dawn broke on their way up from Woolwich to Wapping the night before, and as a poet, had bitterly regretted this lapse ever since.

She looked round at the others. Mickie had the tiller, Sally the jib-sheets, and Robert crouched broodily by the centre-plate. Their faces looked white and drawn, and their noses shone. Even Robert's usually neat head was rumpled and untidy, and Sally's hair hung in lank rats' tails, its ribbon gone. Jane felt her own - it was damp and fuzzy. She shivered again and felt suddenly depressed.

Everybody felt rather depressed. The breeze that had seemed so kindly had become dank and chill, their insides were empty and yet somehow not hungry, and

their eyes smarted for lack of sleep. The miles that stretched between them and Hammersmith appeared to their tired minds now an interminable weary distance, and they just couldn't believe that Mummy and Daddy were really coming home to-day.

Then, all at once, they saw that the sky above the dingy buildings to the east was tinged with gold. Stronger and stronger it grew, touching the edges of the few clouds that lingered, until suddenly Jane, in a voice that rose to a high-pitched squeak, cried.

'There's the sun!'

And so it was. Huge and round, and fiery yellow, it seemed almost to leap into the sky, so swiftly it rose. It touched everything with magic fingers, giving them all their ordinary day-time appearance, as if they were old friends that had been disguised and now suddenly put on their everyday clothes again.

The children saw with astonishment that the sky that had seemed so grey a short time before was now a lovely clear blue, and they felt warm and comforted, and different altogether.

'Not far to go now,' said Robert cheerfully, as they slid past the Chelsea Embankment. 'How about breakfast, mister?'

Sally uncurled herself like a cat, and yielding up the jib-sheets to Jane, dealt out the remnants of the food.

So the long miles slipped by in the steadily increasing warmth of a glorious summer day. It seemed impossible to the crew of *Imperialda* that it was only a few

days since they had rushed down these very reaches, towed by Jim's police launch. They felt they had been away for years.

At last they rounded the broad bend of Putney Reach, past the rowing clubs, past Mickie's buoy (which he now could point out with pride), past the National Benzole wharf - and there before them, gaunt and hideous and beloved, towered Hammer-smith Bridge.

As though by mutual consent, the Lorrimers greeted it with a rousing cheer, and Robert, feeling it must be nearly mid-day, looked at his watch.

'Gosh!' he cried, 'it's only seven o'clock.'

'Hooray!' cried Mickie. 'Time for another breakfast when we get home.'

They manœuvred the bridge with the careless ease of seasoned mariners, and as they neared Mr. Larch's yard, the skipper, once more at the helm, summoned all hands on deck. Sally alert and ready at the main halyards, Jane at the jib, and Mickie at the centre-plate, they skimmed upstream. As the stern of Mr. Larch's first barge came abeam they put their hands to their mouths, and let out one united yell:

'LANDLUBBERS AHOY!'

Out of the shed popped the boat-builder's round, red face.

'Blimey!' he said. '*Esmeralda!* Why, I thought you was all dead and gone long ago! Where're you from?'

'THE NORE!' they shrieked as they scudded past.

Mr. Larch gazed after them open mouthed. With eyes wide, yet still critical, he watched them come about into the wind, lower their sails with beautiful precision, and slip neatly alongside. Then, as Mickie sprang ashore waving the painter, he dealt his thigh a resounding slap, and burst into guffaws of triumphant mirth.

'Well I never!' he spluttered. 'The Nore! There an' back, safe an' sound. Well I'll be . . .'

'Oh, but that's not all!' shouted Mickie, beside himself with excitement. 'We've captured a gang of desperate criminals as well!'

Mr. Larch's face grew sceptical. 'You 'ave? Tell us another?'

'Oh, but we did!' they cried, all speaking at once and interrupting, contradicting, exaggerating, and frequently repeating, they told him their story.

A more satisfactory audience it would have been difficult to find. His eyes bulged, his gaze travelled in amazement from one to the other of the tellers, and every few minutes his mouth fell open to ejaculate 'Nao!' 'Blimey!' or 'Well, I'll be . . .'. When at last they had finished, he shook his head slowly from side to side.

'Well, did you ever see the like! You certainly 'ave seen a bit o' life! Fancy that Ben Skinner lettin' 'isself in for a show like that - not as I'd shed any tears over 'im, the old rascal! Well, well, 'oo'd 'a' thought it!'

Pleasant as Mr. Larch's reactions were to hear, the

skipper soon felt compelled to summon his crew to work once more.

'Come on, chaps,' he said. 'We want to go back in plenty of time before Mummy and Daddy get home. and we *must* leave *Esmeralda* all ship-shape first.'

They worked with a will, all tiredness forgotten. *Esmeralda* did not look quite as trim and unscathed as when they had left Mr. Larch's yard, but every scab they felt was honourably won, every scrape a trophy of far voyaging.

Nine o'clock was striking as they coiled the last rope, and bade her the last fond farewell. It was as they turned their backs upon her, that Robert, with stricken face, realised that they had not a penny piece between them for the bus.

'Never mind,' said Jane, uplifted to the point of endurance, 'we'll just have to walk home.'

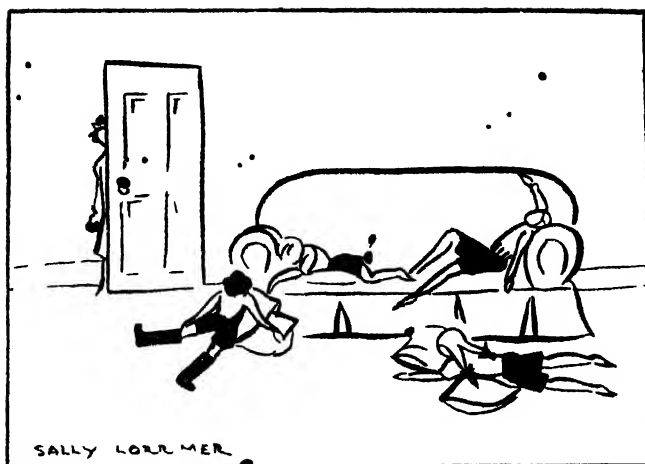
But here, suddenly and surprisingly, the spirit of the first mate gave way.

'I can't!' she cried hysterically. 'It's miles – and miles – and miles – and I can't – and I WON'T.'

So there was nothing for it, but for the skipper to pocket his pride and borrow one and fourpence from Mr. Larch.

That worthy surveyed them with a grim, as they trailed up the gang-plank.

• 'Keep yer peckers up, mates,' he cried. 'And we'll make sailors of yer yet.'



(CHAPTER 22

IT MUST HAVE BEEN one of the very oldest taxis still plying for hire. As it rattled slowly through the streets, Miss Lorrimer felt a wild longing to stick pins into the ancient driver

'I do think it's a bit odd, John,' she said for the hundredth time. 'You know how the children love sending cables, and they must have got ours the day before yesterday.'

'Now don't worry,' smiled Major Lorrimer, also for the hundredth time. 'They're such scatter-brains that I should have been almost more surprised if we *had* heard from them. Anyhow, two more turnings, if this incredible vehicle can stagger that far, and you

know you'll see them all standing on the doorstep, waving like mad.'

As the taxi swerved perilously into Victoria Road, Mrs. Lorrimer craned her head out of the window. There was number 199, standing primly in its little garden. But where were the children? There was nobody there. Nobody on the doorstep. Nobody on the balcony. Nobody at the window.

'They're ill,' she cried despairingly.

'Nonsense!' returned her husband, with Mickie's own grin. 'You know the plane got in early, and we're before schedule. You couldn't expect them to wait on the doorstep all day.'

'I could,' she said, 'when they know you're coming back.'

Helping him carefully out of the taxi, she thrust her key into the front door. The hall was silent and deserted. No flying footsteps rushed down the stairs, no voices shrieked excitedly. She rang the bell, but not even Heidi appeared.

Suddenly her eye lighted on a strange pile at the foot of the stairs - sea-boots, oilskins, scarves, biscuit-tins, bottles and ends of rope.

'Good heavens!' she exclaimed. 'What on earth have they been up to?'

'They must have been away after all,' said Major Lorrimer. 'If there was anywhere where they could have sailed, I should have said they'd been sailing.'

'But there's nowhere they could have been,' cried

his wife. 'They had nowhere to go. Oh, well,' she added resignedly. 'They seem to be out, anyway, so we'd better go upstairs and get you settled comfortably on the sofa.'

At the top of the stairs, Major Lorrimer paused for breath. The drawing-room door was shut, and with a little exclamation of annoyance, Mrs. Lorrimer flung it open. On the threshold they both halted, thunder-struck.

Strewn about the room in various extraordinary attitudes, were their four children. Sally on the sofa, Robert in the arm-chair, and Mickie and Jane sprawling on the hearth-rug, one and all were sound asleep.

'What on earth — !' exclaimed their father.

'Good heavens!' cried their mother. 'What has happened to them?'

'Robert!' called Major Lorrimer sharply.

'Sally!' cried his wife.

But not so much as a muscle of the four sleeping figures stirred.

'Is this a joke, or what?' exclaimed their father. He limped forward, and taking hold of a handful of Mickie's curls, raised his head: but the moment he let go it flopped back again on to the floor with a bump.

'They're drugged!' shrieked Mrs. Lorrimer. 'Look at their clothes! They're filthy!'

'They're fooling,' said Major Lorrimer sharply, and raising his voice to parade ground pitch, bellowed: 'ROBERT!'

The sleepers started convulsively, and one by one raised heavy lids. For a moment they blinked unbelievably at the two familiar figures with eyes that refused to focus; then with one united yell they leapt to their feet, and in a moment Major and Mrs. Lorrimer were enveloped in four pairs of indiscriminately hugging arms, and a tidal wave of shrieks and exclamations broke over their heads.

'Daddy! Mummy! Oh, Daddy, are you better? When did you come? Why didn't we hear you?' and finally, in astonished tones from Mickie: 'Gosh, I believe I was asleep!'

At this their father and mother sat down on the sofa and laughed until they cried.

'Now what on earth?' said Major Lorrimer at last, wiping his streaming eyes. 'What on earth have you young jackanapes been up to?'

'Well

The crew of *Esmeralda* took a deep breath, and all burst into speech at the same time.

'Well, it was because of Aunt Mary --'

'You see, as soon as we saw *Esmeralda* --'

'Of course it was Gerrie May started it --'

'Oh, Daddy, *Esmeralda* is so beautiful --'

Their father raised a despairing hand. 'For the love of Mike, don't all talk at once. Who is *Esmeralda*? Robert, you've usually got some grains of sense. Would you mind telling me just what this is all about?'

Robert planted himself on the hearth-rug, with legs wide apart, wrinkled his brow, and began:

'Well, it's like this, Daddy. You see, we've got a boat.'

'A BOAT! Who lent you a boat?'

'It isn't lent - it's ours - we bought it.'

'You've bought a boat! My good boy, what with?'

'Well, that's just it - -'

At this awkward juncture the telephone rang. Robert leapt to answer it, thankful for the interruption, for what had seemed so natural in the doing, appeared suddenly rather difficult to explain.

'Hullo,' he said, 'good Lord, Jim! How are you? Oh yes, we got home all right, thanks. I say, you didn't think it caddish of us slipping off like that last night? - No - Well - What? - US? - A reward? - Crikey, Jim! I say, you're not trying to be funny, are you? Honest? You're sure? THIRTY POUNDS?'

At this point his brother and sisters could bear it no longer, and with one voice began to clamour for enlightenment.

'I say, Jim,' said Robert hurriedly. 'They're making such a row I can't hear - they want to hear about it too - Look, come to tea this afternoon. Then you can see my mother and father, and tell us all about it. You can? Grand - good-bye and thank you most awfully.'

Forgetting the explanations still due to his parents, Robert turned excitedly to his crew.

'Just imagine, chaps, they're giving us a reward of thirty pounds for helping them nab Rory O'Moore!'

With these words, the crew of *Esmeralda* felt the only shadow fade from their pleasure. *Esmeralda's* purchase money could now be repaid in full, and they were honest citizens once more.

'Well, now,' said Robert, returning to the hearth-rug with lightened brow. 'This is how it all happened. The day Mummy went, we took a bus to the London River, and we saw a boat and her name was *Esmeralda* . . .